Witches! An Intriguing Study by W.O.G. LOFTS

THE saint MAGAZINE

APRIL
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Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

The TRIPLE V Shoots It Out with Castro's Killers on 42nd Street in

THE THIRD BROTHER

An Exciting Counter-Spy Story
by WENZELL BROWN

THE FRIGHTENED INNKEEPER

A Complete saint Novel
by LESLIE CHARTERIS

Also

EMIL PETAJA

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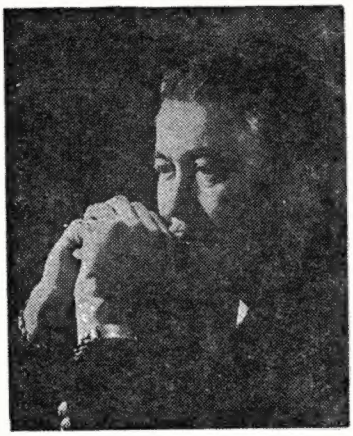

The renewed respectability of science fiction and its revival as a theme for major cinema and television productions should bring only joy to an old *aficionado* like myself. But there is one aspect of this recrudescence which I must view with alarm.

I have noticed that the new generation of writers and producers of science fiction for the masses (as distinct from those catering to the sophisticated audience of serious fans) has fallen almost unanimously for the hoary old cliche of using BEMs as the routine menace to intrepid Earthlings either here or on their excursions through the galaxy.

A BEM, I should explain to those of our readers who are not also long-time SF addicts, is the cult acronym for Bug-Eyed Monster, meaning the inhabitant of the utmost depths of the ocean, the hollow center of the earth, or a saucer-borne invader from Constellation Z, who has the misfortune to look completely different from any of the creatures we are accustomed to, and to communicate by noises different from any earthly languages.

The different appearance, it has been agreed, is always horrifyingly hairy or slimy, and the noises are easily provoked into terrifying electronic screams and roars. Never by any chance is one of these strange species depicted as being of hitherto unimagined beauty, or speaking in tones that make our finest symphonies sound discordant.

Also, repulsive as the unfamiliar sight and sound of them may make these beings to our conventional standards, they are by common consent vicious, malevolent, and (even when so much more advanced than we are that they can build space-ships that travel faster than light) totally devoid of any finer feelings of sensibilities, so that it is the manifest duty of our human heroes to destroy them as swiftly and brutally as possible, while the audience cheers to see them get what's coming to them.

I have sat through so much of this that I have decided it is high time to appoint myself a committee of one to crusade for a square deal for Bug-Eyed Monsters. Is it their fault that their race evolved along different lines from ours? Because they look and sound different from us, must we regard them with horror? And not even stop to think that we might seem just as hideous to them? Because they are alien, should this make them automatically fair game to be speared, shot at, singed, gassed, or otherwise assaulted, and should we be indignant if they resent it and try to defend themselves?

If we are ever to make contact with other worlds, we shall certainly blow it if we are not geared to a more tolerant approach. Already it may not be too soon to start. Let somebody launch a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Monsters. Make our slogan "Be kind to a Monster—he could be your best friend."

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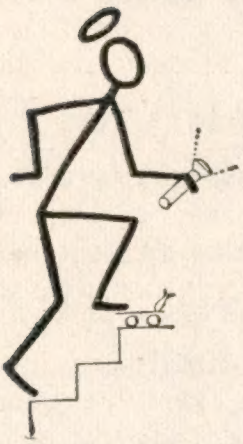

The Frightened Innkeeper 3
by LESLIE CHARTERIS

Sydelle 68
by BRAD STEIGER

The Third Brother 75
by WENZELL BROWN

Stirred Ashes 125
by EMIL PETAJA

Witches! 134
by W. O. G. LOFTS

The Lighted Window 152
by DOROTHEA GOLDFINGER

Death of an Asteroid 155
by SAM MOSKOWITZ

Margie 160
by STEFAN SANTESSON

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the frightened innkeeper

by Leslie Charteris

"BUSINESS" took Simon Templar to Penzance, though nobody ever knew exactly what he had to do there. He took Hoppy Uniatz with him for company, but Hoppy never saw him do it. Simon parked him in the bar of a convenient pub for an hour, and that was that. For all that this story can record, he may have spent the hour in another pub across the street, talking to nobody and watching nothing. The Saint's business was as irregular as himself, and directed by the same incalculable twists of motive: he was liable to do a great many important things with apparent aimlessness, and a great many unimportant things with the most specious and circumstantial parade of reasons.

It is about two hundred and eighty miles from London to Penzance, which the Saint drove in five hours, including one break for a cigarette and a drink in Taunton; and after that one hour for which Hop-

Although this story was written more than 30 years ago, the theme (which I cannot be more specific about here, for fear of robbing you of the revelation later in the story) has been so much in the news lately that if I hadn't taken the thoughtful precaution of writing it when I did, I should have had to write it now. *L.C.*

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py Uniatz was alone, he climbed back into his car as if he was cheerfully prepared to drive the same two hundred and eighty miles home without further delay.

The chronicler, whose one object it is to conceal no fact which by its unfair suppression might deceive any one of the two hundred and fifty thousand earnest readers of this epic, is able to reveal that this performance had never entered Simon Templar's head; although the Saint would have done it without turning a hair if it had happened to be necessary. But he did not say so; and Mr. Uniatz, citizen of a country whose inhabitants regard a thousand-mile jaunt in much the same light as the average Londoner regards a trip to Brighton, would have been quite unperturbed whatever the Saint had announced for his programme. Hardly anything was capable of perturbing Mr. Uniatz except a call for mental effort lasting more than five consecutive seconds, and that was an ordeal to which he had never been known to submit himself voluntarily.

He sat placidly at the Saint's side while the huge snarling Hirondel droned eastwards along the coast, chewing the butt of an incredibly rank cigar in a paradise of utter intellectual vacancy which allowed his battered features to relax in a calm that had its own rugged beauty, being very much like something that Epstein might have conceived in a sportive mood. They left the rocks of Cornwall behind them and entered the rolling pastures and red earth of Devon, diving sometimes through the cool shadows of a wood, sometimes catching sight of a wedge of sea sparkling in the sunlight between a fold of the hills. Simon Templar, who was constitutionally unable to regard the highways of England as anything but a gigantic road-face circuit laid out for his personal use, did nothing to encourage a placid relaxation in anybody who rode with him; but Hoppy had sat in that car often enough to learn that any other attitude could lead only to a nervous breakdown. Only once was he jarred out of his phlegmatic fatalism, when the Saint sounded his horn and pulled out to pass a big speeding saloon on a straight stretch beyond Sidmouth. As they swept up alongside, the saloon swerved out spitefully: the Saint's face hardened under a sheath of bronze, and he held grimly on, with his offside wheels

on the very edge of the road. They got through, with a shrill scraping of wings; and then Simon swung the Hirondel sharply in, and heard Hoppy's breath hiss through his teeth.

"Geez, boss," said Mr. Uniatz uncertainly, "I t'ought we was finished, den." He felt around at his hip. "Say, why don't ya stop de wagon an' lemme go back an' shoot up dat god-damn son of a witch?"

Simon glanced at the driving mirror, and smiled rather gently.

"He has been shot up, Hoppy," he said; and Mr. Uniatz looked back and saw that the saloon had stopped far behind, tilting over at a perilous angle with its nearside wheels buried in a deep ditch.

They roared over four more hills, whipped around half a dozen more corners in hair-raising skids, and thundered past a gaunt grey building in a barren hollow, close to the road. Simon took the cigarette from between his lips and pointed to it.

"Do you know what that place is, Hoppy?" he asked.

Hoppy screwed his neck round.

"It looks like a jail, boss," he said; and the Saint grinned.

"It is a jail," he murmured. "With that eagle eye of yours, you go straight to the bullseye. That noble pile is Larkstone Prison, where the worst of the first offenders go—there isn't anyone in it who's doing less than seven years. Chief Inspector Claud Eustace Teal has often told me how much he'd like to see me there."

They climbed another slope, and dropped down with surprising contrast into Larkstone Vale. In an instant the rather monotonously undulating agricultural country through which they had been travelling disappeared like a mirage, and they were coasting down a mild gradient cut into one wall of the valley towards the sea. A glimpse of thatched cottages clustering along the borders of the estuary blinked through the trees which cloaked the slope, and a broad shallow stream wound southwards in the same direction a little way below them. It was one of the least known beauty spots in the South West, still unspoiled even in those days; and the setting sun, abruptly cut off by the rise which they had just crested, left it in a pool of peaceful dusk which made all the tortuous alleys of lawlessness where the Saint made his career, and where the men in the drab prison

over the last spur of hill had been less fortunate, seem momentarily ridiculous and unreal.

Simon trod on the brake and brought the great car to a smooth standstill on the upper ledge of the village.

"I think this will do us for the night," he said.

"We ain't goin' back to London?" asked Mr. Uniatz, putting two and two together with a certain justifiable pride in his achievement.

The Saint shook his head.

"Not tonight, Hoppy. Perhaps not for days and days. I like the look of this place. There may be adventure—romance—a beauteous damsel in distress—anything. You never know. They may even have some good beer, which would do me almost as much good. C'mon, fella—let's have a look round."

Mr. Uniatz disentangled himself from the bucket seat in which his muscular form had been wedged, and stepped stoically into the road. He was not by nature or upbringing a romantic man, and the only damsels in distress he had ever seen were those he distressed himself; but he had been afflicted since adolescence with a chronic parching of the gullet, and the place where they had stopped looked as if it might be able to assist him on his endless search for relief. It was an old rambling house of white plaster and oak timbering, with dormer windows breaking through a thatched roof and crimson ramblers straggling up the walls; a carved and painted sign over the door proclaimed it to be the Clevely Arms. Entering hopefully, Mr. Uniatz saw the Saint drawing off his gloves in a sort of lounge hall with a rough-hewn staircase at the far end, his dark head almost touching the beams and his blue eyes twinkling with an expectant humour that might well have been worn by an Elizabethan privateer standing in the same spot three hundred and fifty years ago. But no Elizabethan privateer could have had more right to that smile and the twinkling eye with it than the Saint, who had carved his name into the dull material of the twentieth century as a privateer on a scale that would have made Queen Elizabeth dizzy to think of.

"Over there," he said, "I think you'll find what you want."

He swung across the hall and ducked under a low lintel on one side into a small but comfortable bar. A pleasant-looking grey-haired man with glasses came through a cur-

tain behind the counter as he approached, and bade them good evening.

"I should like a pint of beer," said the Saint, "and half a bottle of whisky."

The grey-haired man filled a pewter tankard from the wood, and turned back with it.

"And a whisky?" he queried.

He had a quiet and educated voice, and the Saint hated to shock him. But his first duty was to his friend.

"Half a bottle," he repeated.

"Would you like me to wrap it up?"

"I hardly think," said the Saint, with some regret, "that that will ever be necessary."

The landlord took down a half-bottle from the shelf behind him, and put it on the counter. Simon slid it along to Mr. Uniatz. Mr. Uniatz removed the cap, placed the neck in his mouth, and poured gratefully. His Adam's apple throbbed in rhythmic appreciation as the neat spirit flowed soothingly through the arid deserts of his throat in a stream that would have rapidly choked anyone with a less calloused oesophagus.

Simon turned again to the landlord, who was watching the demonstration in a kind of dazed awe.

"You see why I find it cheaper to buy in bulk," he remarked.

The grey-haired man blinked speechlessly; and Hoppy put down the empty bottle and wiped his lips with a sigh.

"You ain't seen nut'n yet, pal," he declared. "Where I come from, dey call me a fairy."

It was the first time he had spoken since they entered the house, and Simon was utterly unprepared for the result.

All the colour drained out of the grey-haired man's face; and the ten-shilling note which Simon had laid on the bar, which he had just picked up, slipped through his shaking fingers and fluttered down out of sight. He stared at Hoppy with his nostrils twitching and his eyes dilated in stark terror, waiting without movement as if he expected sudden death to leap at him across the bar.

It only lasted for a moment, that startling transformation into terrified immobility; and then he stooped and clumsily retrieved the fallen note.

"Excuse me," he muttered, and shuffled out through the curtain behind the counter.

The Saint put down his tankard and fished out a cig-

arette. Not even the most shameless flatterer had ever said that Hoppy's voice was vibrant with seductive music: such a statement, even with the kindest intentions, could not have been made convincingly about that rasping dialect of New York's lower East Side which was the only language Mr. Uniatz knew. Hoppy's voice was about as attractive and musical as a file operating on a sheet of jagged tinplate. But the Saint had never known it to strike anyone with such sheer paralysed horror as he had seen the landlord reduced to for that brief amazing moment.

Mr. Uniatz, who had been staring at the curtained opening with a blank fish-like expression which in its own way was no less cataleptic, turned perplexedly towards him, seeking light.

"Dijja see dat, boss?" he demanded. "De guy looked like he was waitin' for us to turn de heat on him! Did I say anyt'ing I shouldn't of?"

Simon shook his head.

"I wouldn't know, Hoppy," "Maybe the bloke doesn't like fairies—you can never tell, in these great open spaces."

He might have said more; but he heard a footstep beyond the curtain, and picked up his tankard again. And then, for the second time, he put it down untouched; for it was a girl who came through into the serving space behind the bar.

If there was to be a beauteous damsel in distress, Simon decided, the conventions insisted that it must be her role. She was tall and slender, with dark straight hair that took on an unexpected curl around her neck, steady grey eyes, and a mouth to which there was only one obvious way of paying tribute. Her skin reminded him vaguely of peaches and rose-petals, and the sway of her dress as she came in gave him a suggestion of her figure that filled his head with ideas of a kind to which he was quite amorally susceptible. She said "good evening" in a voice that scarcely intruded itself into the quiet room, and turned to some mysterious business with the shelves behind her.

Simon left a drift of smoke float away from his cigarette, and his blue eyes returned with a trace of reluctance to the homely features of Mr. Uniatz.

"What would you think," he asked, "of a girl whose name was Julia?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her start, and turned round to face her

with that gay expectant smile coming back to his lips. He knew he had been right.

"I came right along," he said.

Her gaze flashed to Hoppy Uniatz, and then back to the Saint, in a second of frightened uncertainty.

"I don't understand," she said.

Simon picked up a burnt match-stick from the floor and leaned his elbows on the bar. As he moved his tankark to make room, it spilt a tiny puddle of beer on the match-stick in the puddle and drew a moist line down from it towards her, branching out into a couple of legs. While he did it, he talked.

"My name is Tombs." He drew a pair of arms spreading out from his first straight line, so that the sketch suddenly became an absurd childish drawing of a man with the original spot of liquid from which it had developed for a head. "I booked a room the other day, by letter." He dipped the match again, and drew a neat elliptical halo of beer over the head of his figure. "Didn't you get it?" he asked, with perfectly natural puzzlement.

She stared down at his completed handiwork for a moment; and then she raised her eyes to his face with a sudden light of hope and relief in them. She picked up a cloth and wiped the drawing away with a hand that was not quite steady.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I'm sorry—I didn't recognise you. You haven't stayed here before, have you?"

"I'm afraid not," said the Saint. "But then, I didn't know what I was missing."

Once again she glanced nervously at Mr. Uniatz, who was gazing wistfully at a row of bottles whose smug fulness was reawakening the pangs of his incurable malady.

"I'll get the man to take your bags up," she said.

Taking in the grace of her slim young suppleness as she turned away, Simon Templar was more than ever convinced that he was not wasting his time. He had been lured into no wild-goose chase. In that quiet inn at the foot of Larkstone Vale there was a man in whose eyes he had seen the fear of death, and a damsel in distress who was as beautiful as anything he had seen for many moons; that was more or less what he had been promised, and it was only right that the promise should have been so accurately fulfilled. The dreary cynics were everlastingly wrong; such joyously perfect and improbable things did

happen—they were always happening to him. He knew that he was once more on the frontiers of adventure; but even then he did not dream of anything so amazing as the offer that Bellamy Wage had made on the day when he was sentenced to ten years, penal servitude after the Neovision Radio Company failed for nearly two million pounds.

"Say," blurted Hoppy Uniatz, broaching a subject which had clearly been harassing him for some time, "is anyt'ing de matter wit' me?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said the Saint pitilessly, from the basin where he was washing the dust of travel from his face. "All that whisky you sluice your system with must have its effect some day, even on a tin stomach like yours. What are the symptoms?"

Mr. Uniatz was not talking about ailments of that kind.

"De foist time I open my mout' in dis jernt, de barman looks at me like he t'inks I'm gonna take him for a ride. When de goil comes in, she looks at me just de same way, like I was some kinda snake. I ain't no Ronald Colman, boss, but I never t'ought my pan was dat bad. Have all dese guys here got de jitters, or is anyt'ing de matter wit' me?" he asked, working back to his original problem.

The Saint finished drying his face with a chuckle, and slung the towel round his neck. He took a cigarette from a packet on the table and lighted it.

"I'm afraid I've rather led you up the garden, Hoppy," he confessed.

"De garden?" repeated Mr Uniatz dimly.

"I've been kidding you," said the Saint, hastily abandoning metaphor, in which Mr. Uniatz was always liable to lose his way. "We aren't stopping here just because I saw the place and thought we'd stay. I came here on purpose."

Hoppy Uniatz digested this statement. Simon could watch the idea percolating gradually into his skull.

"Oah...I see... So when you says de name is Tombs ——"

"That's the name I'm using here, as long as it takes in anybody. And don't you forget it."

"I get it, boss. An' de room you booked——"

Simon laughed.

"That requires a little more explanation," he said.

He took up his coat from

where he had thrown it over a chair, and slipped out an envelope from the breast pocket. The lamplight gleamed on a ripple of his bare biceps as he sprawled himself over the bed with it.

"Listen to this," he commanded:

"Dear Saint,

I've no right to be writing this letter to you, and probably you'll never even read it. I've never met you, and I don't even know what you look like. But I've read about some of the things you've done, and if you're the sort of man I think you are you might listen to me for a minute.

This is an old sixteenth century inn which belongs to my uncle, who's a retired engineer. My father died in South Africa five months ago, and I came here to live because there was nowhere else for me to go.

Queer things have been happening here, Saint. I don't know how to go on, because it sounds such utter nonsense. But I've heard people walking around the place at night, when I know perfectly well there's nobody about; and sometimes there are sort of rumbling noises underground that I can't account for. Lately there have been some horrible men here —I know you must be thinking I am raving already, it sounds so childish and hysterical, but if only I could talk to you myself, I might be able to convince you.

I can't go on writing like this, Saint. You'll just think, 'Oh, another neurotic female who wants a good smacking,' and throw it into the waste-paper basket. But if you're ever travelling this way, and you have a little time to spare, I'd give anything to see you drop in. You can stay here as an ordinary guest, and find out for yourself whether I'm crazy. My uncle says I am, but he's frightened too. I can see he is, even though he won't admit it.

Something's growing up in this place that must mean trouble; and it might be in your line. I wish I could hope that you'd believe me.

JULIA TRAFFORD

The furrows of painful thought grooved themselves into Mr. Uniatz's brow again.

"Julia?" he said. "Was dat de dame we spoke to downstairs?"

"I take it she was."

"An' she wrote you dat letter?"

"To which I replied saying that I should come here as soon as I could, armed to the

teeth and probably masquerading under the suggestive name of Tombs."

"So we come here today on poipose——"

"To find out whether the girl really is nuts, or whether there are fun and games in the offing that might keep us out of mischief for a while."

Mr. Uniatz nodded. The layout was becoming clearer. Only one major point remained obscure.

"Whaddas it got to do," he asked, "wit' de garden?"

The Saint groaned helplessly, and rolled off the bed to rake out a clean shirt from his Oshkosh. Buttoning it at the open window, he looked out through a loose grille of trees, over the red and grey roofs of the village towards the sea. The tide was out, and the estuary was a tongue of glistening reddish mud, veined with tiny rivulets, that licked in between the hills and drank up the flow of the river. On either edge of it a narrow strip of shingle broke straight up into irregular red cliffs capped with velvet grass. The mud was littered with dinghies and stranded buoys, and the broad hulls of a half-dozen fishing boats lay canted over along the line of the deepest channel, with a man or two moving on the decks about the ordinary business of checking tackle and sorting nets. There was a sense of peace and patience about the place, an atmosphere of changeless simplicity and homeliness, that made him wonder once again what sinister racket could possibly find food in such surroundings. But that was what he had come there to discover.

He picked up his coat with a good-humoured smile.

"I'll murder you later," he promised Mr. Uniatz kindly.

Leaving Hoppy to perform his own ablutions, he went downstairs again and strolled out into the road. He wanted a map from his car to gain a more detailed knowledge of the topography of the district; and on his way back he collected another item of information from the legend painted over the door in the traditional style: *MARTIN JEFFROLL, Licensed to Sell Wines, Beer, Spirits, and Tobacco.* The superscription was not new, but revealed traces of an older name which had been blacked out. Presumably Mr. Jeffroll was the grey-haired man who had been so strangely frightened by the sound of Hoppy Uniatz's discordant voice.

Simon went back into the

little bar off the hall and lighted a fresh cigarette. It was Jeffroll who came through the curtains and civilly declined the Saint's invitation to join him in a drink. Simon ordered a pink gin, and was served with unobtrusive courtesy: the panic-stricken creature whom he had glimpsed in Jeffroll's shoes a short while ago might never have existed, but the landlord had withdrawn behind a wall of indefinable reserve that was somewhat discouraging to idle conversation. Having served the drink, he retired again through the curtain, leaving the Saint alone.

Simon took up the glass and solemnly drank his own health in the mirror behind the bar; and he was setting the glass down again when the same mirror showed him a man who had just come into the hall. Quite spontaneously he turned round and scanned the newcomer as he came on under the low arch —it was purely the instinctive speculative scan of a lone man at a bar who considers the approach of another lone man with whom he may exchange some of the trivial conversation that ordinarily breaks out on these occasions, and he was unsuspectingly surprised to notice that the other was coming towards him with more than speculative directness.

There was hardly time in the short distance that the other had to cover for the Saint's curiosity to grow beyond the vaguest neutrality; and then the man was standing in front of him.

"Is that your car outside?" he asked.

His voice was harsh and domineering; and the Saint did not like it. Studying the man more closely in the waning light, he decided that he didn't care much for its owner, either. He had never been able to conceive an instant brotherly regard for ginger-headed men in loud-checked ginger plus fours, with puffy bags under their small eyes and mouths that turned down sulkily at the corners, particularly when they spoke with harsh domineering voices; but even then he was not actually suspicious.

"I have got a car outside," he said coolly. "A cream and red Hirondel."

"I see. So you're the swine who drove me into a ditch outside Sidmouth."

The Saint ceased to be perplexed. A genial smile of complete comprehension lighted up his face.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed happily. "Have you been all

this time getting out?"

"What did you say?" snarled the man.

"I asked whether you'd been all this time getting out," Simon repeated, with undiminished affability. "Or was that a rude question? Is your car still in and did you walk from there?"

The man took another step towards him. At those still closer quarters, he did not look any more attractive.

"Don't give me any of your lip," he rasped. "Do you know you nearly killed me with your dirty driving?"

"I rather hoped I had," said the Saint calmly. "I like killing road-hogs—it makes the country so much more pleasant to move about in."

"Say that again?"

Simon raised his eyebrows. The ginger-haired man, even without knowing the Saint, might have been warned by the imperturbable leisureliness of that gesture alone; but he was too close beside himself with rage to perceive his own foolishness.

"My dear hog," said the Saint, "are you deaf or something? I said——"

It has already been mentioned that the ginger-haired man was incapable of perceiving his own foolishness. Otherwise he could not possibly have been tempted as he was by the half-glass of gin and angostura which Simon Templar was posing in his left hand while he talked. Even though he might have known the toughness of his own two-hundred-pound frame, and might have guessed that the debonair young man in front of him weighed no more than a hundred and seventy-five pounds, he need not have allowed his undisciplined temper to make him such a sempiternal sap. But he did.

His hand smacked up in an insolent swipe; and the glass of pink gin was knocked up through the Saint's fingers to splash its contents over Simon's face and the front of his coat.

Simon glanced at the mess, and started to take out his handkerchief. He was smiling again; and the Saint was as dangerous as a Turk when he smiled.

"That was rather rash of you," he said; and suddenly his fist shot out like a bullet from a gun.

The ginger-haired man never even saw it coming. Something that was more like a lump of brown rock than a human fist leapt towards him through the intervening space and collided smashingly with his nose in a punch that sent him reeling back in a blind gush of agony to

fetch up jarringly against the wall behind him. Hauling himself forward again with a strangled oath, he saw the Saint's gentle smile again through a crimson mist, and launched a vicious swing at it that would have been worth all his trouble if it had connected. But in some unaccountable way the smile omitted to keep the appointment. It swayed unhurriedly aside at the very moment when the swing should have met it; and the violence with which his fist bludgeoned the empty air threw the ginger-haired man off his balance. In technical language, he led off for the next blow with his chin, and that same astonishingly hard fist was there in exactly the right place to meet his lead. The only difference was that on this encounter he felt no pain. His teeth scrunched shudderingly together under the impact; and then every raw and vengeful thought in his head was wiped out by a ringing of heavenly bells and a vast soothing darkness that merged indistinguishably into dreamless sleep. . . .

Simon picked up his handkerchief again and quietly mopped the sticky dampness off his clothes. Jeffroll had come through into the bar again, and he realised that the girl Julia was standing in the low archway that connected with the hall. But it was not until he noticed how silently they were staring at the recumbent slumber of the ginger-haired man that he realised that the delightful episode which had just taken place had an implication for them that he would never have suspected.

Jeffroll was the first to look up.

"What happened?" he asked.

The Saint shrugged.

"I haven't the faintest idea," he replied blandly. "The bloke seemed a bit excited, and I think he banged his head on something. It doesn't look like a very exhilarating pastime, but I suppose there's no accounting for tastes. Was he a pal of yours?"

Jeffroll let himself out from behind the bar and dropped on one knee beside the prostrate ginger-clad body, without answering. Simon's coolly observant eyes noticed that his hands were trembling again, and that his actions contained an essence of something more than the natural solicitude of a conventional innkeeper whose premises

have been desecrated by an ordinary breach of the peace. The Saint put away his sodden handkerchief and considered whether he had left anything undone that might improve the shining hour; and then he saw the startled face of Hoppy Uniatz peering over Julia Trafford's shoulder, and went across to him.

Mr. Uniatz's mouth hung open—and, hanging open, it was an amazingly large mouth. The light of battle was peeping tentatively out of his eyes like spring sunshine through a cloud.

"What ya hit him wit', boss?" he asked wistfully. And then, as the merest afterthought: "Who is dat guy?"

"The guy we ditched near Sidmouth," explained the Saint under his breath. He grasped Hoppy firmly by the arm. "And now shut your face for a bit, will you? I guess I'm about ready to eat.

The dining-room was a low raftered room looking out on to a tiny garden cut out of the sheer hillside. Simon steered Mr. Uniatz briskly into it before that unrivalled maestro of tactlessness could drop any heavier bricks in the hearing of the chief protagonists, but when he reached his sanctuary he found that it was considerably less invulnerable than he had hoped it would be. The room only held four tables, and it was so small that the four of them might have been joined together in one communal board for all the privacy they afforded. Moreover, one of the tables was already occupied by a party of four men who fell curiously silent at the Saint's entrance.

They were in their shirt-sleeves, and their shapeless trousers had an air of grubby masculine comfort, as if they were placidly prepared to crawl about on their knees or sit down on a heap of loose earth without any qualms about its effect on their appearance. At first sight they might easily have been taken for a quartet of hikers; and yet, if that was what they were, they must have started on their pilgrimage very recently, for their bare forearms were practically untouched by the sun. Their hands, in contrast to that unexpected whiteness of arm, were coarsened with the unmistakable rough griminess of manual labour, which could hardly overtake the average holiday tramper before exposure had left its mark on his skin. It was that minor contradiction of make-up, perhaps, rather than their unfriendly silence, which made Simon Templar pay

particular attention to them; but there was no outward and visible sign of his interest. He took them in at one casual glance, with all their individual oddities—a big black-haired man who had not shaved, a thin fair-haired man with a weak chin, a bald burly man with a vintage-port complexion, and an incongruously small and nondescript man with a grey moustache and pince-nez. And beyond that one sweeping survey there was nothing to show that he had taken any more notice of their existence than he had of the typical country-hotel wallpaper adorned with strips of pink ribbon and bouquets of unidentifiable vegetation with which some earlier landlord had endeavoured to improve his property. He dumped Mr. Uniatz in a seat at a corner table, taking for himself the chair which commanded a full view of the room, and cast a pessimistic eye over the menu.

It offered one of those seductive bilingual repasts with which the traveller in England, whatever he may have to put up with during the day, is so richly compensated at eventide.

Potage Birmingham

Boiled Cod au Beurre

Leg de Mouton rôti
Pommes Chips
Spinach

Suet Pudding
Fromage—Biscuits

Simon put down the masterpiece with a faint sigh, and opened his cigarette-case.

"Did I ever tell you," he asked, "about the extraordinary experience of a most respectable sheep I used to know, whose name was Percibald?"

It was plain from the expression on Mr. Uniatz's homely pan that he had never heard the story. It was equally plain that he was ready to try dutifully to discover its precise connection with the shindig in hand. The convolutions of painful concentration carved themselves deeper into his dial.

"Boss—"

"Percibald," said the Saint firmly, "was a sheep of exceptionally distinguished appearance, as you may judge from the fact that he was once the innocent cause of a libel action in which a famous Cabinet Minister sued the president and council of the Royal Academy for damages on the grounds that a picture exhibited in their galleries portrayed him in the act of sharing the embraces

of a nearly nude wench with every evidence of enjoyment. On investigation it was found that the painting had only been intended for a harmless pastoral scene featuring a few classical nymphs and shepherds, and that the artist, feeling that shepherds without any sheep might look somewhat stupid, had induced Percibald to pose with one of the nymphs in the foreground. This, however, was merely an incident in Percibald's varied career. The extraordinary experience I was going to tell you about. . ."

He blurbed on, hardening his heart against the pathetic perplexity of his audience. It is one of the chronicler's major regrets that the extraordinary experience of Percibald is not suitable for quotation in a volume which may fall into the hands of ladies and young children; but it is doubtful whether Mr. Uniatz ever saw the point. Nor was the Saint greatly concerned about whether he did or not. His main object was to shut off the spate of questions with which Mr. Uniatz's hairy bosom was obviously overflowing.

At the same time, without ever seeming to pay any attention to them, he was quietly watching the four men in the opposite corner. After their first silence they had put their heads together so briefly and casually that if he had actually taken his eyes off them for a moment he might not have noticed it. Then an exchange of whispered words opened out into an elaborately natural argument which he had no trouble to hear even while he was talking himself.

"Well, I know it's on the road to Yeovil. I've been there often enough."

"Damn it, I was born and brought up in Crewkerne, and I ought to know."

"I'll bet you a pound you don't."

"I'll bet you five pounds you're talking through your hat."

"Well, you show it to me on a map."

"All right, who's got a map?"

It turned out that none of them had a map. The big unshaven man finished loading his pipe and got up.

"Perhaps the landlord's got a map."

"He hasn't. I asked him yesterday."

The extraordinary experience of Percibald reached its indelicate conclusion. Mr. Uniatz looked as if he was going to cry. The Saint scanned his memory rapidly for another anecdote; and then the big

man moved a little way down the mantelpiece and cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, sir—do you happen to have a map of the country around Yeovil?"

Simon put aside a plate containing a small piece of lukewarm blotting-paper which was apparently the translation of Boiled Cod au Beurre.

"I've got one in the car," he said. "Are you in a hurry?"

"Oh, no. Not a bit. We just want to settle an argument—I don't know if you know the district?"

"Vaguely."

"Do you know Champney Castle? I say it's between Crewkerne and Yeovil, and my friend says it's in the other direction—on the way to Ilchester."

The Saint had never heard of Champney Castle, and he was even inclined to doubt whether such a place existed; but it never occurred to him to interfere with anybody's innocent amusements.

"I know it quite well," he replied unblushingly. "There's an entrance from the Ilchester Road and another from the Yeovil Road. So you're both right."

The man looked convincingly blank for a moment; and then a chuckle of laughter broke out from his companions, in which he joined. Cordial relations having thus been established, the other members of the party turned their chairs to an angle that subtly gathered up the Saint and Hoppy into their conversation. It was all very neatly and efficiently done, with a disarming geniality that would have melted the reserve of anyone less hoarily aged in sin.

"Are you staying here long?" inquired the fat man with the fruity face.

"I haven't made any plans," answered the Saint carelessly. "I expect we'll hang around for a few days, if there's anything interesting to do."

"Do you like fishing?"

"Sometimes."

"You get some pretty big conger off Larkstone Point."

Simon nodded.

"I should think they'd be good sport."

The small man with the grey moustache polished his pince-nez industriously on a napkin.

"Dangerous, of course, if you don't know your business," he remarked. "You don't want to loop the gaff on your wrist—if you did that, and made a slip, I don't suppose we'd ever see you again. But lots of things are

much more dangerous."

"I suppose so," agreed the Saint gravely.

"Lots of things," repeated the thin fair-haired man, apparently addressing the tablecloth.

"For instance," said the fat fruity man thoughtfully, "I've never been able to make out why everybody in America seems to be so frightened of gangsters. If any of them tried to do their stuff over here, I'm sure that would be very dangerous. . .for them."

The big unshaven man struck a match.

"Wouldn't stand an earthly, would they, Major? I don't know how the police would react to it; but personally I wouldn't have any compunction about tying 'em to a rock at low tide and leaving 'em there."

"Nor would I," echoed the one with the fair hair, to his audience of bread-crumbs.

"Serve them right if we did it," said the grey moustache clearly. "I haven't any sympathy for common thugs who try to shove their noses into other people's business."

Not even Mr. Uniatz's most ardent admirers, if he ever had any, could fairly have flattered him on his lightning grasp of conversational trends; but he had a definite talent for assimilating a simple idea if it was pushed under his nose several times in a sufficient variety of ways. Even then, he was still far from knowing exactly what was going on; but it was dimly percolating into the misty twilight of what for want of a better word must be loosely termed his mind (*a*) that the four men at the other table were saying something uncomplimentary, and (*b*) that their attitude included some general disparagement of the manners and customs of his native land. It would be untrue to suggest that he knew the meaning of more than half of these words, but they would have served to convey a fairly accurate description of his psychic impressions if he had known them. It was also a matter of elementary knowledge to him that a guy does not get uncomplimentary to another guy without he is prepared to shoot his best insults out of a rod; and that was a stage of the proceedings at which Mr. Uniatz could make up a lot of lost ground in the way of repartee. He began to grope frowningly around his hip, but Simon kicked him under the table and smiled.

"You do sound bloodthirsty," he murmured.

The bald fruity man got

up. Standing on his feet, he looked big and solid in spite of his rich complexion and extensive waist-line.

"Oh, no. Not particularly bloodthirsty. Just four old soldiers who got used to being shot at quite a long while ago. I really don't think we'd be the best people for any gangsters to pick on—some of them would certainly get hurt. It's worth thinking about, anyway!"

A waitress came in with the next course of the Saint's dinner. She went over and whispered something to the grey-moustached man, who dropped his pince-nez and spoke in an undertone to the fair-haired man with the receding chin. The other two looked at them as they got up.

"You must excuse us," said the grey moustache, rather abruptly.

He went out, and the others followed him after a second's hesitation. Hoppy Uniatz stared at the closing door blankly—he was experiencing some of the sensations of an early Christian who, having braced himself for a slap-up martyrdom, has been rudely sniffed at by a lion and then left high and dry in the middle of the arena. Coming on top of the other incomprehensible things that had happened to him since he arrived there, this was not soothing. He turned to the Saint with a rough sketch of these complex emotions working itself out on his face.

"Boss," he said awkwardly, "dis place makes me noivous."

Simon Templar chuckled, and probed a tentative fork into the section of warm rawhide crowned with a wodge of repulsive green mash which was apparently the local interpretation of Leg de Mouton under the influence of spinach.

"I can't imagine it, Hoppy," he said.

Mr. Uniatz's frown deepened.

"Ja see dose guys take a run-out powder on us?" he demanded, starting methodically at the beginning.

"They do seem to have breezed on."

"Maybe dey see me goin' for my Betsy," said Mr. Uniatz, passing on to the more nebulous realms of theory.

"They could hardly have helped it."

"Well, where dey t'ink dey get off pullin' dat stuff an' beatin' it before we say anyt'ing?"

The Saint grinned.

"I think we can say we've been very politely warned off. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen it done in a more classical style—those birds must have been reading the smoothest detective stories. How's your spinach? Mine tastes as if they'd been mowing the lawn this afternoon."

He struggled through as much more of the meal as his stomach would endure, and lighted a cigarette. Mr. Uniatz was finished some time before him—Hoppy's calloused maw would have engulfed a plateful of live toads dressed with thistles and woodpulp without noticing anything extraordinary about the menu, even in normal times, and when he was worried he was even less likely to observe what he was eating. Simon pushed back his chair and stood up cheerfully.

"Let's take a walk," he said.

Mr. Uniatz licked his lips yearningly.

"I could just do wit' a drink, boss."

"Afterwards," said the Saint inexorably. "I want to look over the lie of the land."

There was no sign of the four genial diners when they went out, nor of the unpleasant ginger-haired man who had been foolish. A couple of obvious local inhabitants were poring over tankards of beer in the bar parlour off the hall—Simon caught a mere glimpse of them as he went by, but he did not see Martin Jeffroll, and there was nothing visible or audible to suggest that anything worth the attention of a modern buccaneer had happened there for the last two hundred years.

He got into his car and drove it round to the garage, a ramshackle shed dumped inartistically on to the north wall of the inn. It had never been designed to give a comfortable berth to cars of the Hirondel's extravagantly rakish proportions, and there was a big grey lorry parked along one side which forced the Saint to go through some complicated maneouvres before he could get in. He managed to squeeze himself into the available space with some accompaniment of bad language, and rejoined Hoppy on the road.

"We'll go down to the waterfront and smell some ozone."

There was a rough grey stone promenade where the lowest houses straggled along the edge of the bay, and at one end of the village a similar stone causeway sloped down from it and ran out for

some distance along the edge of the channel through which the river found its way seawards through the mud. Apparently it had been laid out at some time to give easier access to the boats moored in the channel at low tide. The usual fishing village's collection of miscellaneous hardy craft was scattered out across the inlet, with here and there a hull whose brighter paint and more delicate lines spoke of some more fortunate resident's pleasure. A little way out on the darkening water he could see a few scraps of sail, and a curiously shaped vessel at anchor which looked like a dredger.

He was rather surprised to see a signpost on the quay—one arm pointed to Seaton, the other to Sidmouth. He had not known that there was another through road besides the one by which he had arrived. Later that evening he looked it up on a map and found that there was an alternative route along the coast which took a big loop seawards, rejoining his own road near Lyme Regis.

The knowledge did not immediately give him any clue to the mystery. He sat on a bollard and watched the tide lap in through the gathering dark, smoking a steady series of cigarettes and trying to coördinate his meagre information. There was a girl who did not look particularly hysterical, who had heard strange things at night. There was an innkeeper who was undoubtedly a badly frightened man. There was a red-haired road hog who seemed to have something to do with something. There were four hikers untouched by the weather who talked like traditional conspirators in the accents of Sandhurst. He could see one rather obvious theory which might somehow embrace them all, but it failed to satisfy him. Larkstone was some way east of the historical smugglers' country; and in any case the popularisation of aerial transport had changed all the settings of that profession.

Mr. Uniatz had no theories. He had been trying very hard to work several things out for himself, but after a while the effort gave him a headache and he laid off.

It was quite dark when they strolled back to the hotel. Jeffroll was locking up. He bade the Saint a distantly polite good night, and Simon remembered the lorry which was taking up more than its fair share of the garage.

"Do you think it could be moved?" he asked. "I'm likely

to be here for two or three days."

The landlord pursed his lips apologetically.

"As a matter of fact, it was left here on account of a debt by a man I've never seen again. It won't go—the propeller shaft is broken. And it's too heavy to push. I don't want to spend any money on repairing it, and I'm trying to sell it as it stands. I'm afraid it is a bit of a nuisance, but I'd be very much obliged if you could put up with it."

Simon went upstairs with the knowledge that he was unlikely to get much sleep that night, but the prospect did not trouble him. He had gone without sleep before, and could give the appearance of going without it for phenomenal periods, although by cat-napping at appropriate moments he could secure more rest than many people gain from a night's conventional slumber. At the same time he wished that he could have heard more from Julia Trafford first, and it might have been a telepathic fulfilment of his unspoken thought when the door of his bedroom opened again almost as soon as he had closed it and she came in.

Almost every woman has some setting in which she can look astonishingly beautiful: for Julia Trafford, wide-trousered crêpe de chine pyjamas and a flimsy silk wrap, with the shaded lights striking unexpected glints of copper from her dark hair, was only one of many. Hoppy Uniatz, who had no natural modesty, stared at her dreamily. The Saint could have thought of many more interesting things to talk to her about than the troubles of her frightened uncle; but he hoped she was not going to fall in love with him, which was one of the most serious risks he ran when succouring damsels in distress.

"I had to see you," she said. "That letter I wrote was so stupid—I didn't believe you'd pay any attention to it at all. Are you really the Saint?"

"Scotland Yard is convinced about it," he said solemnly, "so I suppose I must be."

He made her sit down and gave her a cigarette.

"What exactly is this all about?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said helplessly. "That's the trouble. That's why I wrote to you. There's something ugly going on. My uncle's terrified, even though he won't admit it. I've begged him to tell me several times, but he keeps on saying I'm imagining things. And I know that isn't true."

The ginger-haired man, apparently, had been there before; and on his second visit had been accompanied by two others whose descriptions sounded equally unpleasant. Each time he had seen Jeffroll alone, and each time the interview had left the innkeeper white and shaking. After both occasions she had made attempts to gain his confidence, but he had only denied that there was any trouble, and refused to talk about it any more. She knew, however, that since the second visit he had taken out a licence for a revolver, for the local police sergeant had come in with it one afternoon when he was out.

"Do you think he's being blackmailed?" she asked.

"I don't know," said the Saint mildly. "What about these noises you hear at night —would they be the blackmailers painting up their armour?"

"They're—well, I told you nearly all I could in my letter. This is a very old place, and a lot of boards creak when they're stepped on. Sometimes when I've been lying awake reading at night I've heard them, even when I know Uncle Martin's gone to bed and nobody else has any business to be moving about. At first I thought we were being burgled, but I went downstairs twice and I couldn't find anybody."

He raised his eyebrows.

"You thought there were burglars in the place, and you went down to look for them alone?"

"Oh, I'm not nervous—I think most burglars would run for their lives if they thought anybody was coming after them. But that was before that red-haired man came here."

"And the noises have been going on—how long?"

"Nearly all the time I've been here. And then there's the rumbling. It sounds like a train going by, very close, so that the house vibrates; but the nearest railway is five miles away." She looked at him with a sudden youthful defiance. "You don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"I've never seen one yet," he said coolly. "Certainly not a ginger-haired one in ginger plus fours."

He finished his cigarette and lighted another, strolling thoughtfully about the room. He did believe in neurotic women, having been pestered by more than his share, but he knew no species which panicked over imaginary terrors and at the same time went single-handed in search of burglars. Besides, he had

seen certain things for himself. The landlord's startling reaction to Mr. Uniatz's rasping voice, for instance—it had puzzled him considerably at the time, but he realised now that a man who had had disturbing interviews with a bloke like Gingerhead might have some reason to be frightened of a stranger who looked and talked like the most blatantly typical gangster that ever stepped. Obviously Jeffroll was being threatened; but ordinary blackmail was a very inadequate explanation, and the cruder forms of extortion were not likely to reach a small innkeeper in an obscure Devonshire village.

"Who are the Four Horsemen?"

She was baffled for a moment.

"Oh, you mean the men who were having dinner? They were here before I came. My uncle seems to be quite friendly with them. They go out fishing every night—you never see them about before dinner."

The fat fruity man, he learned, was Major Portmore; the big black-haired man was Mr. Kane; the grey moustache and pince-nez were worn by Captain Voss; and the thin man with the deficient chin who always talked to the table was blessed with the name of Weems.

"They've always been perfectly nice to me," she said.

"I'll believe you," he murmured. "I thought they were most refined. A bit sinister in their line of backchat, but very British. What happened to the ginger bloke?"

She didn't know. Jeffroll had carted him into his private office to revive him, leaving her in charge of the bar, and later on had announced that the patient had recovered and departed quietly. He had seemed pleased, and this was understandable.

The Saint smiled.

"I suppose there must be a good deal of head-scratching going on about us by this time," he said. "First of all we're taken for a couple of Gingerhead's strongarm guys, and then I sock Gingerhead on the jaw and put the whole thing cockeyed. I wonder if Uncle is tying himself in knots over it, or whether he thinks the whole show was a piece of low cunning especially staged to put him off the scent."

"I couldn't tell you; but I'll let you know if I do find out. You've spoken to Major Portmore, then—what did he have to say?"

"He was quite pleasant. They told us they didn't like

gangsters, and gave us a few ideas about what they'd feel like doing if any hoodlums tried to muscle in on their preserves. It was all very nicely done, and if Id been an ordinary thug I might have been quite impressed. Possibly. But I'll agree with you that they seem pretty harmless fellows at heart, and that only makes things more complicated. If they're quite innocent, why the hell don't they get some policemen to deal with Gingerhead and me?"

He scowled over the enigma for a few moments longer, and then he shrugged.

"Anyway, I suppose we'll find out. I'm going to do my sleeping in the daytime like the Four Horsemen—the night has a thousand eyes, and mine are going to be two of 'em."

He got up out of the armchair into which he had thrown himself, with a quick smile that wiped the hard calculating lines out of his face in a flash of careless friendliness that was absurdly comforting. She really was rather beautiful, even if that moment found her at a loss for anything but the conventional answer.

"I don't know why you should take so much trouble—"

"It's no trouble. Most of us have to earn our living, and if there is any useful racket working around her I shall get my percentage out of the gate. I'll let you know where I get to, and you can keep in touch with me. I haven't made up my mind yet what part I'm going to try to put over, so you'd better not take a lot more risks like this in case anybody got wise to us. If I want to tell you anything, I'll leave a note"—he glanced swiftly about the room—"under that corner of the carpet. And you'd better park your mail in the same place. Unless it's desperately urgent. Don't worry, kid—Hoppy and I are rough on rats, and when the ungodly think up a game that we didn't play in our cradles. . ."

He left the rest of the sentence in the air, with the hairs at the back of his neck tingling.

While he talked, he had become faintly aware of a queer vibration that was at first too deep in its choice of wavelength to be perceptible to any ordinary faculty. And then, gradually, it grew strong enough to be felt. A glass upturned over the neck of the carafe on the washstand trilled in a sudden shrill relay of the impulse. He listened, in utter silence, and

heard something like the rumble of wheels roll through the earth and come to a thudding stop far underneath his feet.

Julia Trafford's face was suddenly white in the dim light which robbed the tapestry covering of the chairback behind her of much of its hideousness. Her lips parted breathlessly.

"That's it," she whispered, with her grey eyes widening against his. "You heard it yourself—didn't you? That's what I've been hearing."

The lamplight cut dark lines and piratical masses of shadow out of his brown face, brought up the glint of blue steel in his mocking gaze. He stood checked in precarious stillness, with the white scrap of his cigarette clipped between steady fingers; and the lamp threw his shadow towering up the wall so that his head and shoulders stooped over the low ceiling.

"How far away is this railway?" he said.

"The line's about five miles inland—the nearest station is Colyford."

He nodded.

"Go back to your room, bright eyes," he said, and his hand touched her shoulder as she stood up. "And don't lose any sleep over it. Whatever this racket is, I'll take it apart and see what makes it go."

He closed the door after he and found Hoppy Uniatz gaping at it with the glazed other-worldly look of a man who is going to be seasick. For a couple of seconds he studied the phenomenon in fascinated silence; and then he cleared his throat tactfully, and Mr. Uniatz came out of his trance with a guilty start.

"I could give dat dame a tumble sometime—when I ain't got nut'n better to do," he said, in a tone so overpoweringly blasé that the Saint blinked at him in considerable awe.

Simon would have liked to probe deeper into this remarkable statement, but he reserved his curiosity for a more leisured date.

"I think I'll wander about the place and look at the architecture," he said.

"Okay, boss." Mr. Uniatz roused himself finally out of his dreams, and dragged out his Betsy. He slid back the jacket and inspected the cartridge in the chamber with unromantic stoicism. "Wit' you an' me on de job, I guess dis racket is on de skids."

"With me on the job, it may be," said the Saint calm-

ly. "You're going to stay here and snore for both of us—and that ought to be a push-over for you."

He was firm about this, in spite of Hoppy's injured protests. For a partner in a gun-fight, Simon would have asked nobody better; but for a tour of stealthy investigation he would as soon have chosen a boisterous young bison.

"I want you to look after Julia," he said craftily, and Mr. Uniatz brightened. "Where are you going?"

"Anyt'ing you say goes, boss," said Hoppy, with his hand on the door-knob.

"You don't have to go," said the Saint coldly. "I said look after the girl, not at her. Her room's just down the passage on the other side, and if she's in trouble you'll be able to hear her. When she wants you in her bedroom I'm sure she'll ask for you."

He left Mr. Uniatz brooding happily over this consoling thought, and went out into the dark corridor. At such times of emergency the Saint's fluency of shameless inventiveness was unparalleled—he had not the faintest idea where Julia Trafford's room was actually situated, and the fear of what might happen if an amorous and impatient Mr. Uniatz went prowling hopefully into the bedchamber of a hysterical cook was perhaps one of the most disturbing thoughts in his mind at that moment.

The passage was more or less, rather less than more, lighted by the wavering gleam of a small oil lamp hung in a bracket on the wall—from the beginning he had noticed this prevalence of primitive illumination in the hotel, for he had seen the silver pylons of the national electric supply grid spanning the valley as he drove down. Downstairs it was quite dark; but on these ventures he carried his own illumination which was less conspicuous in any case than switching on the ordinary lights in any place he wanted to explore.

The dim beam of an electric flashlight in his hand, irised down to the thinnest useful pencil of luminance by a circle of tinfoil pasted over the lens, guided him about the ground floor. No creaking boards betrayed his movements, for he had a tread like a cat when he chose to use it, and an uncanny instinct for treacherous footings. He covered the rooms which he had seen before, hall and dining-room and lounge bar, and others which he had not seen but which were roughly what he would have expected to find. The kitchen was behind

the dining-room, a big stone-flagged room like a barn, which must have served for a staff dining-room as well, and might well have held even more distinguished company in the days when eating was a heartier and more earnest business. Opening off the kitchen was a long paved passage which seemed to run the length of the building. He tried the different doors, each with the same care and silence, and reviewed a series of sculleries, pantries, lavatories, coal and wood cellars, wine and beer stores, and a small staff sitting-room. The last door, at the end, appeared to lead out into a yard at the back—it was locked on the inside, and when he turned the key he found himself in the open under the shadow of the garage.

He was retracing his steps when he heard the dull vibrant rumble under his feet again. It was much more distinct than it had sounded upstairs, with a definite metallic harshness, but even then it was not so loud that he could fix it clearly in his mind. If he had been there as an ordinary unsuspecting guest, it might not have attracted his attention at all—he would probably have put it down subconsciously to a heavy lorry passing on the road outside, and would never have felt urged to probe into it further. Also, the place being what it was, he would very soon have been in bed and asleep; and there was nothing sufficiently startling about the muffled noise to wake him. But he was not asleep and he was not unsuspecting, and he knew that the sound was not quite the same as that of a passing lorry.

He opened another door in the passage and found himself in another short length of corridor—it was scarcely large enough to be called an inner hall. On one side was a door carrying the painted word "Private": it was locked, and he guessed that this was Jeffroll's own sanctum. On the other side was a red curtain, and when he went through it he discovered himself back in the diminutive lounge, but on the serving side of the bar.

There was one obvious thing to do there, and the Saint was nerveless enough to do it. He paid the money scrupulously into the till and sat on the bar with his modest glass and a completely brazen cigarette, waiting and listening in silence. Twenty minutes later he heard the noise again.

This time it seemed to give birth to three faint echoes—

they were about sixty seconds apart, and each of them was sharper and crisper in tone than the original sound. The effect was something like that of three slow spaced rollers of surf sweeping up a shinglebeach. Again the noise was not startlingly loud, but it was closer and clearer.

Simon ran thoughtful fingers through his hair. The rumble passed again, seeming to recede into the distance; and then the stillness settled down again. His watch told him that it was nearly midnight, but he had no superstitions.

He slid down to the floor, broke up the stub of his cigarette and washed the fragments down the sink under the bar, dried his glass on a cloth and replaced it on its shelf, and picked up his torch. He was, for the moment, irritatingly stymied; but he felt that something ought to be done. He had verified the last fraction of Julia Trafford's story, and he was baffled to find any natural explanation. On the other hand, up to that moment he had also failed to find an unlawful solution. Secret passages of some kind were manifestly indicated, but to measure every room and corridor and draw up plans of the building to locate discrepancies in the sum total was a lengthy job for which he had very little patience and, prosaically enough, no implements at all.

There remained the locked door of Jeffroll's private office, and he thought he could cope with this. Curiously enough it gave him an unaccountable difficulty, and he had been working on it for a couple of minutes before he discovered that the thing that was obstructing his skeleton key was another key left in the lock on the inside.

He changed his instrument for a pair of thin-nosed pliers and turned the key quite easily, but with even greater caution. A key on the inside of a locked room, except in fictional murder mysteries, vouches for someone on the inside to turn it; and yet he could not see so much as a glimmer of light in the cracks between the old badly-fitting oak door and its frame. Then, as he took up the pressure of the latch with delicately practised fingers, he heard a limp sort of dragging scuff of movement which no normal ambusher would have made, and a grunting moan of sterterously exhaled breath which removed the last of his hesitation.

The nape of his neck prickled, but he went in boldly—

he had an intuitive certainty of what he would find there, and he did not gasp when the beam of his torch shone full into the dilated eyes of the man with ginger hair.

Simon swept his flashlight round in a quick survey of the rest of the room. There was no other visible exit than the door which he had just opened, unless the door of a large built-in safe in another wall concealed unconventional secrets. There was a desk with a swivel chair behind it, a typewriter on a side table, a filing cabinet, a shelf littered with books and papers, an armchair, and a few faded and nondescript prints on the walls—the conventional furnishings of a small country hotel office. He had no doubt that some of these superficially innocuous fittings might repay closer investigation, but he turned back to the ginger-haired man as a more obvious feature of interest.

"Do you do this for fun, or are you practising a vaudeville act?" he murmured pleasantly.

The other made no answer, for the very good reason that his mouth was blocked by an amateurish but effective gag. Nor, as he might well have been tempted to do, did he get up and make another attempt to destroy the symmetry of the Saint's face, because the lengths of wire bound tightly about his wrists and ankles made any such hearty greeting impossible.

Simon enjoyed the sound of his own voice, but in those circumstances he was prepared to be generous. He squatted down and loosened the gag sufficiently to remove one of Gingerhead's disadvantages, but not so thoroughly that it could not be speedily replaced if necessary. When the cloth was pulled down he saw that the man's mouth was twitching with fear.

"What are you going to do?"

Simon tilted up his flashlight to show his own face.

"What would you do to a bloke who was very rude to you and spilt your drink?" he asked.

The man licked his lips.

"I didn't mean to do that. I lost my temper. I didn't know—"

"What didn't you know?"

"I didn't know you were—one of them. You've got to let me out. You can't do anything to me. There's a law in this country—"

Simon thought quickly, and

came to a decision.

"Let you out, Ginger Whiskers? You're a bit of an optimist, aren't you?"

"I could make it worth your while," said the other feverishly. His voice was not harsh and domineering now, but its quavering terror was perhaps even more unpleasant. "I'll give you anything you like—a thousand, two thousand—"

"Go on."

"Five thousand—"

The Saint clicked his tongue reproachfully.

"Ten thousand pounds" said the man shakily. "I'll give you ten thousand pounds to let me go!"

"This is getting interesting," drawled the Saint. "Have you got all this money in your pocket?"

"I can get it for you." The man dropped his voice lower, although neither of them had spoken far above a whisper.

The Saint sighed.

"Sorry, brother, but this is a cash business."

"You could have it first thing in the morning—before that, if you wanted it."

"Where is it coming from?" asked the Saint, with calculated scepticism. "Will you go down into the village and hold out your hat, or are you going to burgle the bank?"

"I know where I can get it. I've got to meet a man—tonight!"

"Where are you going to meet him?"

The man glared at him silently, with narrowing eyes; but Simon stuck to his point.

"Let me go and meet this man," he said slowly. "If he'll pay ten thousand quid to save your life, I'll come back and see about it."

"How do I know you will?"

"You don't," Simon admitted sadly. "But you can take it from me that unless I do see this bird and his money I'm not going to do anything for you. And then the uncertainty would be so much more trying. Instead of wondering whether I was going to help you or not, you'd only be able to wonder whether you were going to be buried alive under the public bar or fed to the congers off Larkstone Point."

He kept his light focused on the ginger-haired man's blotched puffy face, and read everything that was going on in the mind behind it.

"He'll be waiting on the road to Axminster, exactly three miles from Seaton," came the reply at length. "He'll do anything to get me out. For God's sake, hurry?"

Simon doubted whether God would really be deeply concerned, but he allowed the

invocation to pass unchallenged. He bent forward and replaced the gag as it had been when he came in, and switched out his light on the ginger-haired man's mutely terrified eyes.

"If they have fed you to the congers when I get back, I'll go fishing," he murmured kindly.

He left the office on this encouraging note, and let himself out into the back yard by the door at the end of the kitchen passage. The garage doors had been left open, and after a second's hesitation he began to manoeuvre his car out of its place by hand. It was a task that taxed all his strength, but he preferred the hard work to the risk of starting the engine where it might be heard by someone in the hotel. Fortunately the garage was built on a slight slope, and after a good deal of straining and perspiration he manhandled the big Hirondel into a position where he could get in behind the wheel and coast out of the yard and down the hill until it was safe to touch the self-starter. At the first corner he turned round, and sent the great purring monster droning back up the grade towards the Seaton Road. He was well on his way before he remembered that he had not even waited to tell Hoppy Uniatz where he was going.

There was something else which he had forgotten, but he did not recall that until much later.

He was conscious of a deep and solemn exhilaration. The sublime good fortune that was always spreading itself so prodigally over all his adventures showed no signs of shirking its responsibilities. Destiny was still doing its stuff. One got a letter, one went somewhere, one exchanged a few lines of affable badinage with a selection of mysterious blokes, one dotted an ugly sinner on the button, and forthwith the wheels began to go round. It might have been a coincidence that he had had cause to smite Ginger Whiskers so early in the proceedings; but from then on everything had unwound like clockwork. The presence of Ginger Whiskers, bound and gagged, in that locked office, was only part of the machinery—obviously, when Jeffroll had come out and seen him slumbering peacefully and harmlessly on the floor, the opportunity to put him away must have seemed far too good to miss. Simon would have grabbed at it himself, and he guessed that the decision was the

cause of the message which had summoned the Four Horsemen from the dining-room and broken up their friendly exchange of compliments. Everything, up to that point, was clear: the mystery of what it was all about remained. But the eccentric philanthropist who was willing to pay ten thousand pounds for the life of a blister like Gingerhead might offer some more hints on that subject.

He understood the ginger-haired man's psychology to three places of decimals. Whatever the outcome of this interview might be, the waiting accomplice would at least learn what had happened to his confederate; and Ginger Whiskers was doubtless banking far more heavily on the advantages of getting this message through than on the Saint's desire to help him. If their positions had been reversed, the Saint would have gambled on the same horse. But before that bet was decided he hoped to become much wiser himself—he had forgotten that in certain circles he was one of the best-known men in England.

The trip meter on the dash was just turning over the third mile from Seaton when he picked up a red light stationary by the side of the road. As his headlights drew nearer to it he saw that it was the rear light of a small saloon of a popular make. He dimmed his lights and pulled in just in front of it; and a man came up, walking with quick jerky steps.

"Is that you, Garthwait?"

Simon gathered that this was the name by which Ginger was known to the police. He hunched his shoulders and tried to remember Garthwait's rasping voice.

"Yes."

The light of a powerful torch was flashed on his face, and he heard the unknown man's hissing breath.

"At least," he said quickly, "Garthwait sent me—"

"Mr. Simon Templar, isn't it?" said the other gently. "I know your face quite well."

For a moment the Saint almost recanted his views on the lavish publicity which the newspapers had given to some of his exploits, although for many years that disreputable fame had been one of his most modest vanities. But he smiled.

"You do know your way around, don't you, dear old bird?" he remarked.

"That is my business," said the other dryly, as if he was making a very subtle joke. "Please keep your hands on

the steering wheel, where I can see them. I've got you covered, my friend, and I could shoot you long before you could reach your gun."

His voice had a dusty pedantic quality which was the last intonation Simon Templar would ever have expected from a man who spoke of unlawful armaments and sudden death with so much self-possession.

"You're welcome," said the Saint amiably. "My life is insured, and I'm considered to be an A.1 risk. I wish I could say the same for Comrade Garthwait. There seems to be some sort of idea that he would be Good for Contented Congers; but he said you'd pay ten thousand pounds to keep him on dry land, and I thought it might be worth looking into. I suppose love is blind, but what you can see in a wall-eyed wart like that—"

"Where is Garthwait?"

"When I saw him last, he was gagged up and tied together with wire, meditating about the After Life."

"Where was this?"

"In the Old House."

"The hotel?"

"Oh, no," said the Saint carefully. "It was too risky to keep him there. Don't you know the Old House?"

The man behind the flashlight did not pursue the subject.

"And he told you I'd give you ten thousand pounds to let him out?"

"That's what he said. I'm afraid I thought he was a bit optimistic at the time, but I didn't like to discourage him. After all, when there's so much money at stake—"

"How do you know that?" asked the other sharply.

The Saint smiled.

"Garthwait told me."

"Did he tell you about last night's job?"

"Yes, he told me that, too," answered Simon coolly, and knew in the next instant that he had made a fatal mistake —the man he was talking to was as alive to all the tricks of the trade as he was himself.

"That's interesting," said the dry stilted voice, "because there was never any such thing as 'last night's job.' You had better get out of that car, Mr. Templar. If Garthwait is really in danger, it would doubtless be diminished if your friends knew that you were in a similar predicament."

Simon thought very swiftly. He had set out cheerfully to try his luck, and the luck had gypped him very neatly. At the same time, he couldn't let it have everything its

own way. In a kindly and impartial spirit, he reviewed the pros and cons of the not so philanthropic philanthropist's suggestion for continuing the game, and decided that it lacked any really boisterous humour.

He had not stopped his engine when he stopped the car, but it was throttled down to a mere whisper which might not have forced itself upon the philanthropist's attention. While he appeared to deliberate whether he should obey or not, he made a rapid deduction from the flashlight of the probable position of the man behind it. Then, with a faint shrug, he opened the door.

The light moved out of the way, towards the rear of the car, as he had expected. Turning as if to get out, his left hand found the switch which controlled the car's lights; he had already flipped the car into gear, and his feet were resting on the clutch and accelerator pedals. In one concerted movement he snapped out every light against which he might have been silhouetted, roused the engine to a sudden roar of power, and banged in the clutch.

Something crashed deafeningly behind him and left his ears singing; and then he was crouched low over the steering wheel, swerving away up the road with the seat pressing forcefully into his back under the urge of the Hirondel's terrific power. The open door slammed into latch in the slipstream: his ears caught the thin shred of another more vicious slam behind him that might have been an echo of the door and was not, and his teeth flashed in a Saintly smile before he whirled round the next corner and was out of range.

He was still smiling when he ran down the hill into Larkstone and cut his engine before swinging round to glide up to the garage beside the inn. Even after that minor miscalculation he remained the blithest of optimists —he hadn't once caught sight of the face of the man to whom he had spoken, but he would know that dry pedantic voice anywhere, and he had found men before with less to identify them than that.

He had his next surprise when he turned his wheels towards the garage and prepared to repeat his earlier strenuous performance by manhandling the car back into its berth, for as his dimmed lights panned round he saw that he had an unobstructed run in. The lorry

that had blocked his way before, which Jeffroll had told him was out of action with a broken propeller-shaft, had vanished.

So had Garthwait—he discovered that when he went indoors and opened the door of the manager's office. The mere fact that the door opened without any manipulation reminded him that he had not turned the key from the outside when he left; and then he remembered that he had also left behind the pliers with which he had turned it in the first place—they were still lying on the floor where Garthwait had been, and he recollected that he had put them down when he loosened the gag and had forgotten to pick them up again. The pliers, like most similar instruments, were also wire-cutters; and there were four severed strands of wire lying near them to show how they had been used.

For a man who had made so many mistakes in one night, the Saint went to bed very light-heartedly. He heard the same queer subterranean rumbling twice more before he fell asleep, but he did not allow it to disturb his rest.

The faithful Mr. Uniatz had been snoring serenely in his chair when Simon turned in, and he was still snoring on the same majestic note when the Saint woke up. He leapt up like a startled hippopotamus when the Saint shook him; and then he blinked sheepishly and lowered his gun.

"Sorry, boss...I guess I must of fell asleep."

"After all, a brain like yours must rest sometimes," said the Saint handsomely.

It was eight o'clock, and the morning was clear and bright. Sitting squeezed up in the diminutive bath of the hotel's one rudimentary bathroom, he told the story of his night's adventure in carelessly effervescent sentences—at least, the tale bubbled on exuberantly enough, in the flamboyant inconsequential idiom which was his own inimitable language, until he noticed that his audience was not following him with all the rapt breathlessness which he felt his narrative deserved. He stopped, and regarded Mr. Uniatz speculatively. Mr. Uniatz coughed.

"Boss," said Mr. Uniatz, waking out of his reverie as if the whole tedious business of noises in the night, gagged men in locked rooms, pedagogues with pop-guns, and dis-

appearing lorries had now been satisfactorily disposed of, and the meeting was free to pass on to more spiritual pursuits—"what rhymes wit' 'goil'?"

"'Boil,'" suggested the Saint, after a moment's poetic reflection.

Mr. Uniatz pondered the idea for a while, his lips moving as if in silent prayer. Then he shook his head dubiously.

"I dunno, boss—it don't sound quite right."

"What doesn't sound quite right?"

"Dis voice of mine."

"I shouldn't let that prey on my mind, Hoppy," said the Saint encouragingly, although he was finding the train of thought more and more obscure. "After all, you can't have everything. Maybe Caruso wasn't so hot with a Roscoe."

Hoppy Uniatz frowned.

"I don't mean de verse I talk wit', boss; I mean de voice I'm makin' up when I fall asleep last night. It starts dis way:

"You're so beautiful,
you're like a rose,
I'm tellin' ya, an' I'm a
guy who knows;
Your eyes are like
de shinin' stars,
Dey remind me of my
Ma's;
I t'ink you are a swell
kind of goil——"

He hesitated.

"I bet a neck like yours
never had a berl,"

he concluded, scratching his head. "It don't sound right, somehow, but I never had no practice makin' up pomes."

Simon dried and dressed himself in stunned silence.

He strolled out into the road in the strengthening sunshine, and found his steps leading him almost automatically down towards the harbour, although he had no need of the walk to sharpen his appetite for breakfast. Down on the quay he found a blue-jerseyed old salt smoking his pipe on a bollard and gazing out to sea with the faraway bright blue eye which is popularly supposed to express the sailor's unquenchable yearning for the great open waters, but which can actually be quenched with the most perfunctory dilution of water. It was a very conventional politeness to exchange good mornings, easy enough to pass on to some more explicit appreciations of the weather, and from there to a broader discussion of life in those parts. The man had the easy garrulousness of his kind, and perhaps he also scented a future customer for fishing expeditions.

"Aye, there was more life here when I wurr a boy. Fordy ships there wurr in the fishing fleet then—now, there ain't 'aardly a dozen. What with the 'aarbour fillin' up now an' everything, it do zeem as if we'll all have to take up vaarming afore long." He poked the stem of his pipe towards the horizon. "That dredger out yonder, she been workin' here for three months gone, tryin' to keep us open, but it keeps fillin' up."

Simon gazed out at the thread of smoke rising from the dredger's funnel against the pale blue sky.

"You mean the sea's going back on you?"

"Aye, it do zeem that way zometimes. You zee that channel down there where the boats lay—down there by the causeway? That's where she's woorst. Seems to come up with the tide, like, every night, an' it gets caught there like it would by a breakwater; or else the river brings it down an' the tide catches it an' throws it back. It's all we can do to keep 'er clear." The man's voice held a certain personal pride, as if he himself had gone out with a spade and established the enormity of the disaster at first hand. "It's due to the world goin' round the sun, that's what it is—just as you could walk across on dry land once upon a time from here to France. . . ."

He grumbled on into a startlingly abstruse geological theory which was apparently designed to prove that such things did not happen when the earth was flat—only returning from his flights of imagination when the time came to point out, as the Saint had suspected, that he was the owner of the best boat for fishing on the coast, and that his services could be secured at any time for a purely nominal fee.

Simon made vague promises, and went thoughtfully back up the hill. Nestling into the bank of cool green, with the stippled shadows of the overhanging trees stirring lazily across it, the rambling black-timbered inn looked more than ever like the sort of place where the most sensational mystery should be a polite and courtly seventeenth-century ghost with a clanking chain and a head under its arm; and he wondered if that was one reason why it had been so ideally chosen.

He did not go indoors at once, but continued his stroll round to the garage. The lorry was back in its place, exactly as if it had never been moved; and it would not have

required much self-deception to persuade him that he had dreamed its absence. But the Saint did very little dreaming of that kind; and he touched the radiator and felt that it was warm.

He put his foot on one of the rear wheels and pulled himself up to inspect the interior of the truck. There was a dusty layer of red earth on the bottom, and particles of the same soil clung to the sides: he smeared one between his finger and thumb, and it was damp.

"All very interesting," said the Saint to himself.

He squeezed in between the lorry and the wall, and saw other sprinklings of earth on the concrete floor. The wall against which the truck was parked was an exterior wall of the hotel itself—the bare oak beams and timbering and the rough yellowish plaster seemed to stare out miserably at the cheap modern brickwork and corrugated iron which had been stuck on to them to produce the garage. He spent some minutes in a minute examination of the wall, and used the blade of his penknife to make sure.

When he came out again he was humming gently under his breath, and his blue eyes were twinkling with a quiet and profound delight. The yard straggled off into a long grass slope flimsily cut off by a staked wire fence. He ducked through the wire and sauntered up the hill until he reached a slight prominence from which he had a considerable view of the road which ran past the inn, and the upper country towards which it led. He could see where the straight march of the silver power pylons dropped over the main ridge of hill, stepped carelessly over the road three hundred yards away, and sent its glistening wires in a long sweep over the gladed valley to climb sedately over the rise on the other side. For some time he stood with his hands in his pockets and the dreamiest ghost of a smile on his lips, gazing out over the landscape. There was a ditch at the foot of the hill, beside the road, and it was this that he made for when he walked down again. The bottom of the ditch was overgrown with weeds and couch-grass; but he felt about with his hand, and found what he had expected to find —a heavy insulated cable. He knew that he would find one end of the cable leading to the pylon nearest the road, if he cared to follow it. Walking slowly back to the inn, he came to a place where a slight hump in the road bor-

der indicated a comparatively recently filled excavation. It disappeared at the end of the concrete lane that led to the garage, and he knew that the insulated cable reached its destination somewhere very near.

At that moment he knew half the answer to the riddle of the Clevely Arms, and the solution staggered him.

Hoppy Uniatz was already in the dining-room, endeavouring to persuade a giggling waitress that a pound of fried steak garnished with three eggs and a half-dozen rashers of bacon was a very modest breakfast for a healthy man.

"Get him what he wants, Gladys," said the Saint, sinking into the other chair. "And call yourself lucky he's on a diet. If he was eating properly he'd spread you on a piece of toast and swallow you for an *hors d'oeuvre*."

"Dat bale of straw is fifty in de deck," growled Mr. Uniatz cryptically, reaching for the solace of the bottle of whisky which he had foresightedly brought into the room with him. "Where ya been, boss?"

Simon lighted a cigarette.

"I've been exploring. We'll go on and see some more when you've finished."

"I dunno, boss." Mr. Uniatz stared vacantly at the pink floral *motif* on the opposite wall. "Dis ain't such a bad flea-box. Whadda we have to pull de pin for?"

"We aren't pulling the pin, Hoppy," said the Saint. "This is just some local scenery we're going to take a look at. We may be staying here a long time—I don't know. Life has these uncertainties. But I think the trouble is coming fairly soon."

How soon the trouble was to come he had no means of knowing.

He went up the hill again, with Hoppy, after breakfast, but not in the same direction as he had gone before. This time he climbed the steeper slope due west from the back of the hotel. They struggled through winding paths among the trees and undergrowth to a muttered accompaniment of strange East Side expletives from Mr. Uniatz, who never took exercise out of doors, and presently broke clear of the patch of woodland into a broad bare tract of grass that rolled up to an undulating horizon against the blue sky. From the top of this rise he could see patches of the roof of the inn through the branches; but he was more interested in the view on the opposite side of the hill. He stood looking at this for a little while in

silence while Mr. Uniatz recovered his breath, and then he sat down on the grass and took out his cigarette-case.

"If you can take your mind off poetry for a while and concentrate on what I'm saying, it may be useful," he said. "I want you to know what this is all about—just in case of accidents."

And he went on talking for about half an hour, sorting out the facts and putting them together with infinite deference to the limitations of Mr. Uniatz's cerebral system, until he had made sure that even Hoppy had assimilated as much of the secret as he knew himself. He had never expected to produce any sensational reactions; but Mr. Uniatz bit the end from a cigar and spat it out with a phlegmatic practicality which was equivalent to the flabbergasted incoherence of any lesser man.

"Whadda we do, boss?" he asked.

"We hang around," said the Saint. "It may happen to-night or it may happen a month from now; but we can take it as written that a job like this isn't planned and worked out on that scale without there's something pretty worth-while in it, and when the balloon goes up we'll be around to inspect the boodle."

He had a cool estimate of his own danger. The Garthwait outfit had acquired bigger and better reasons to dislike him, whatever part they had decided he was playing in the pageant. The Jeffroll fraternity might be equally puzzled about his status, but in the next ten minutes he had three separate indications of their esteem.

While he sat talking on the hill his keen eyes had caught the stirring of a bush at the edge of the wooded patch below him, and he had seen the movement of a scrap of white behind it. Walking down again as casually as if he had noticed nothing, he let the path lead him towards the place where he had seen the watcher. It was Major Portmore, leaning against the bole of a tree where the shrubbery almost hid him from the hill-top—but for the flash of his white shirt, he might have been passed unobserved while he stood still. He had a pipe between his teeth and a shot-gun under his arm, and he nodded unconcernedly when the Saint greeted him.

"Thought I might get a rabbit," he said amiably. "You often see them sunning themselves up there."

Simon raised a faintly quizzical eyebrow.

"I should have thought tigers would have been more in your line," he murmured.

"Tigers," said the Major, taking out his pipe, "or rats. It's all the same to me."

The Saint let his eyes dwell gently on the other's shepherd's-warning complexion.

"If the rats are pink ones, on bicycles," he said gravely, "don't shoot."

He left the gallant Major a shade darker in colour, and bore thoughtfully to the left, towards the garage. Slipping into his car, he adjusted the throttle and ignition, and pressed the starter. The engine turned over several times without firing, and he abandoned the effort to save his batteries. Doubtless an expert investigation would show what had been done to put it out of action, but it required no investigation to tell him that Major Portmore's sudden transfer of interest from fishing to rabbiting had the same reason as the disabling of the Hirondel.

He wandered round to the front of the hotel, and found Captain Voss sitting on a bench beside the door with a newspaper on his knee, his face wrinkled up against the glare till he looked like a grey-haired lizard. He said "Good morning" briefly in answer to the Saint's cheery nod, and returned to his paper; but the Saint knew that he did not read another line until they had passed on into the hall.

Simon Templar went into the lounge and sat on a window seat with his feet up, considering these three tributes with the aid of a cigarette. The change of attitude since last night was not lost on him. Then, the principal idea had been to persuade him to move on, and he had gathered that if he moved on without fuss everybody would have been quite happy and asked no questions. Now, even if the idea was not actually to keep him there, it was at least plain that he was not to go anywhere without being watched—the tampering with his car fitted in with that scheme equally well, for it was flagrantly a hopeless car for anyone to try to follow. Simon sat thinking it over with profound interest, while Hoppy Uniatz sat beside him and chewed one end of his cigar and smoked the other in a sublime complacency of unhelpfulness. He heard a small car grind fussily down the road and stop with a squeak outside, without letting it interrupt his meditations; and

then, through the half-open window over his head, he heard something else that stiffened him into attention with a jerk.

"Morning, Voss—is Jeffroll inside?"

It was the thin desiccated voice of the man he had met on the Axminster road in the small hours of that morning—the man who, according to Garthwait himself, might have paid ten thousand pounds for the rescue of that prodigious pimple on the cosmos.

There was no doubt that his bald use of Voss's surname, without prefix, was not meant impertinently; equally beyond question was the implied acceptance of the familiarity in Voss's pleasant reply:

"He's in the office—sorry I can't come in with you."

"Not at all," said the day voice punctiliously.

Simon was peering between the curtains, trying to catch a glimpse of the owner of the voice; and then he heard footsteps in the hall and sank back hurriedly, snatching out a handkerchief to cover his face. Pretending to blow his nose vigorously, but not so noisily as to make himself the object of undesirable curiosity, he saw the man come through the archway which communicated the lounge and the hall. It was a small man, who walked easily under the low beams, and the chief impression it gave was one of studied and all-permeating greyness. Everything about him seemed to be grey—from the top of his baldish head and the parchment pallor of his face, down through his rusty swallow-tail coat and striped trousers, to his incongruously foppish suede shoes. He carried a small black briefcase in a grey-gloved hand; and Simon searched for a moment for the one unmistakable thing that linked his whole appearance to his dry dusty voice. In another moment he got it. The Saint refused to believe that anyone who looked and dressed and spoke so exactly like a rather seedy lawyer could possibly have any other reason for existence.

And this grey old bird was the mysterious unknown who had recognised him on the Axminster road. Simon's eyes narrowed fractionally as he remembered the parched undertone of humour in the man's accounting for that recognition. *"That is my business..."* Undoubtedly it was—but why was this bloke,

whom Garthwait promptly called upon in his emergency, calling in such a friendly fashion on the men who had tied Garthwait up and apparently planned to fatten eels on him?

Simon bit his lips. He would have given much to overhear what was happening in the office; but his explorations had already revealed that there were only two approaches to Jeffroll's sanctum, either through the back of the bar or along the passage from the kitchen, and a moment's reflection showed both of those routes to be impracticable. The Saint swore comprehensively under his breath, damning and blasting everything about the hotel, from the amplyopic architect who had first conceived its fatuous layout down to the last imbecile grandchild of the paranoiac plumbers who had inexplicably omitted to drown themselves in its drains; and, when he took out his cigarette-case again for the soothing compensation of tobacco, it was empty.

He got up restlessly, and went out again to the road. An ancient Morris stood outside, and he recognised it as the car he had met during the night—the identification of the grey dry man was absolutely complete, beyond question. But what the hell was it all about? The lawyer knew that he had been associated with Garthwait, must have known that his voice was easily recognisable; if he had been on such friendly terms with the hotel garrison as his approach and reception seemed to prove, he seemed to be taking an insane risk in coming back to see them after having been caught in his duplicity. Or was it something more than an insane risk? The Saint realised that unless that action were absolutely insane, the danger might be transferred to himself. He had to catch up with the development and put himself in front of it again, quickly. He still wanted a cigarette. . . .

"Going for a walk?" said a quiet voice at his elbow. "Mind if I come with you?"

He had set off to walk down to the village almost automatically, remembering a tobacconist's shop that he had noticed on his earlier stroll; and he had been concentrating so fiercely on his new problem that for the instant his mind had let slip the knowledge that he was under very thinly veiled surveillance.

"I'm only going out for some cigarettes," he said.

"That's just what I want," replied Captain Voss blandly.

For a moment Simon coldly considered whether he should pick up the wizened little man and throw him forcefully over Larkstone Point into the sea; but he controlled himself. He did only want a packet of cigarettes just then, and it would be time enough to start throwing his weight about when he had something more important on hand. But he stopped a little way down the hill to make a pretence of tying his shoelace, and looked back at the hotel. The big black-haired man, Kane, was sitting outside now, exactly as Voss had been sitting, turning the pages of the same newspaper. The door was still guarded while Hoppy remained inside—Voss must have given some signal to call out the reserve watchdog when he left his post.

Simon bought a packet of cigarettes, while Voss made a similar purchase, and turned back up the hill. He was walking slowly, but his brain was tearing along, trying to place itself inside the minds of at least three people at once. In spite of that, while he had built up and demolished a score of theories, he hadn't a single settled hypothesis standing at the end of this quarter of an hour's walk.

Someone else had thought ahead of him—he saluted the fact grimly as he came up to the door of the inn again. The lawyer's car was still standing outside, but the man himself was not in sight. Jeffroll was. He was standing beside Kane, watching them approach; and he nodded as the Saint came up.

"Good morning, Mr. Tombs—could you spare me a moment?"

"Any number," said the Saint coolly.

At that moment he was tense and alert, keyed to a hair-trigger watchfulness, although there was not a trace of uneasiness to be read on his brown face.

"Come into the office," said Jeffroll.

Simon realised that his face was curiously strained and haggard, his mouth twitching unconsciously as it had been the previous evening. Whatever this conversation was to be about, quite definitely it held something that the Saint hadn't included in any of his theories.

Perhaps that was the principal reason why Simon Templar's vigilance relaxed at that crucial moment. He had shrewdly summarised Jeffroll as a man who would

never be a good actor, and he knew that that drawn anxiety was utterly genuine. He followed the landlord through the lounge and the curtains behind the bar, with his imagination whirling through a fresh burst of frantic effort to encompass this new and unexpected twist, but without the same grim vigilance, although he knew that Voss had come in also and was following behind him. That is, and ever after was, the only excuse he could make for himself; and the mistake might have cost him his life.

Jeffroll opened the door of the office, and stood aside for the Saint to go in. Simon went in with a languid stride —Portmore and Weems were there, but the lawyer was surprisingly absent. Then something hard jabbed into his back, and he began to appreciate his error.

"Put up your hands."

It was Jeffroll's voice, behind him, speaking with a half-hysterical menace that held the Saint studiously motionless where a more callous and seasoned intonation might have encouraged him to lazy backchat or even a swift attempt to retrieve the situation. But he was old enough in outlawry to know that the innkeeper's forefinger was as uncertain on the trigger as only the finger of a panic-stricken man can be; and he stood very still.

The weight of his automatic came off his hip pocket; and then he was pushed forward. Only then, when he could turn round and see Jeffroll's face, and keep a wary eye on the man's reactions, did he venture to indulge in any conversational amenities .

"Bless my soul," he remarked mildly. "Do you know, for a moment I thought you were going to kiss me."

Major Portmore reached down under the desk, where he was sitting, and brought up the shot-gun which he had been carrying in the wood that morning.

"Get over against the wall and shut up," he ordered harshly.

Simon got over against the wall.

"Now then," said Jeffroll, over the sights of his revolver, "where is Julia?"

The Saint's mouth hardened as if it had been turned to stone. Then that was the explanation of the landlord's strange whiteness. Ideas drummed through his brain— Hoppy Uniatz asleep, Garthwait who had escaped while he was away, the lawyer's visit.... But he scarcely had

time to pin down one of those speeding flashes of fact before Jeffroll's voice was shrilling into his ears again.

"Hurry up, damn you! I'm going to count up to ten. If you haven't answered by that time——"

"What happens?" asked the Saint, in his quietest voice. "You can hang yourself off that beam without bothering to shoot me—or would you rather have it done legally? And where does it get you, anyhow?"

Portmore nodded.

"That's right," he said impersonally. "I told you shooting was too quick, Jeffroll. Voss—Weems—you tie him up. I'll see if I can make him talk."

Weems got up limply out of his chair and produced a coil of wire. The Saint's arms were twisted behind his back, and the wrists quickly and efficiently bound; then his ankles were similarly treated. Jeffroll's mouth worked as if he was tempted to refuse interference and stick to his original threat, but he said nothing.

Portmore got up and came round the desk. He handed the shot-gun over to Voss and stood in front of the Saint.

"Will you answer that question, or have I got to thrash it out of you?" he demanded.

Simon looked at him steadily. Placed as he was, it required a superhuman effort to hold back the obvious defiance. Only the fact that he could understand and sympathise with the feelings of his inquisitors helped him to check his temper—that, and the knowledge that the same liberties could not be taken with a crazed amateur that could be taken with dispassionate professionals.

"Don't you think it might have been worth while asking me the question in a normal manner, before you were reduced to all this Lyceum stuff?" he replied evenly.

For a second they were taken aback; then Portmore blustered back into the breach.

"All right—if you're going to answer the question, you can answer it now."

"I haven't the vaguest notion where Julia is," said the Saint immediately. "But I expect Garthwait could tell us."

"Because he helped you take her away," chattered Jeffroll.

"You're wrong there," said the Saint, as equably as he could. "I've told you that I had nothing to do with it. Will you tell me when you think she was taken?"

The landlord's white tragic

face was in grotesque contrast to the murderousness of his eyes.

"You know that. You let Garthwait out of this office—you only pretended to fight him because you thought we'd be taken in by you. You took her away between you, last night. You took your car out of the garage—"

"You saw that when you came out to drive a lorry-load of earth from your tunnel down to the quay and tip it into the harbour," said the Saint.

If he had expected to cause a sensation with that blunt challenge, he was disappointed. Not one of the men showed any more reaction than if he had shown that he knew the hotel had a thatched roof; and Jeffroll babbled on: "You took her away in your car, and then Garthwait telephoned this morning—"

"This is wasting time," snarled Voss. "Let him do the talking, old man; and if he doesn't talk we'll see what we can do to make him."

"I'm waiting for a chance to talk," retorted the Saint curtly. "I guess there are plenty of explanations to be made, and I don't want to waste time either. I'll put my cards on the table and trade them for yours, if you can stop making damn fools of yourselves for five minutes."

"Get on with it, then," said Portmore. "And don't call me a damn fool again or I'll hurt you."

Simon looked him in the eyes.

"Hitting a man who can't hit you back would naturally prove you weren't a damn fool, wouldn't it?" he said icily.

"Oh, leave him alone, Portmore," drawled Weems. "Let's hear what he's got to say first."

"Thanks." Simon held the Major's gaze as long as the other would meet it; then he relaxed against the wall. "What I've got to say won't take long. To start with, my name isn't Tombs. It's Templar—Simon Templar. You may have read about me in the newspaper sometime. I'm called the Saint."

This time he did get a reaction; but for about the first time in his life he did not pause to bask in the scrape-grace glow which his own notoriety usually gave him.

"I came down here because I heard there was something mysterious going on, and poking my nose into mysterious goings-on is my business. I'd never met Garthwait in my life, never heard of him, till we had that argument in the bar last night and I pushed

his face in. I know most of the crooks in this country, but I can't know all of them. I came prowling about last night because I heard noises, and I found Garthwait tied up in here—"

"And let him out."

"No. I admit it was my fault that he got out, but it was unintentional. I opened the door with a pair of wire-cutting pliers, and I left them behind, accidentally, when I went out again. Before that, he'd told me that he was supposed to meet a guy on the Axminster road, and that this guy would give me ten thousand quid to let him loose—from the way he talked he seemed to think I was one of your party. I pushed off to keep the date with this guy—"

"And he gave you ten thousand pounds to let Garthwait go," said Voss flatly.

Simon shook his head .

"He didn't—for one reason, because he was a bit wiser in sin than you fellows, and he recognised me."

"But you'd have done it if he had given you ten thousand pounds."

"I don't know," said the Saint candidly. "It isn't my party anyhow, and I've a pretty open mind; but on the whole I doubt it. Anyway the question doesn't arise. I went out to keep this date because I was hoping to collect some more information on this racket you've got here. On account of the guy on the road recognising me, I didn't get much more than a couple of bullets whizzing past my ear; but I did hear his voice, and I've heard it again this morning. I can't help it if you think this is a tall story, but the guy on the road—Garthwait's pal—was your lawyer friend who just called. "

There was a moment's silence; and then Weems sniffed loudly.

"Oh, quate," he said; and Simon Templar, who reckoned that he himself could do almost anything with his voice, had to acknowledge that he had never heard such a quintessence of sneeringly bored incredulity expressed in two syllables.

"You're the worst liar I've ever listened to," rasped Portmore, more crudely. "Why, you bloody crook!—Yestering told us you'd probably have some slippery story—"

"I notice he didn't stay to listen to it," said the Saint.

For a second he had them again; and in that second he got several things straight. Yestering hadn't taken such an insane risk after all—the lawyer had simply come to the hotel with two strings

to his bow and an arrow on each of them, ready to use whichever one his reception told him to. If it had been hostile, he would have known at once that the Saint really was in cahoots with the inn garrison; but Julia Trafford would still remain as an effective hostage. The reception having been friendly, Yestering would have realised that the Saint was sitting in with a lone hand: to pass on the job of getting rid of him to Jeffroll & Co. was the most elementary tactical development. But there was one thing the lawyer had forgotten—or, rather, had never known about—one cogent argument that might still be thrown in in time to break the back of Jeffroll's insensate vengefulness before his fear drove him too far beyond the reach of reason. Seizing his momentary advantage without relaxing a fraction of his iron restraint, the Saint used it.

"I can give you a certain amount of proof," he said. "It doesn't back up every word I say, but it's something. I didn't come down here entirely off my own bat. I was asked to come—by someone on the spot who was definitely worried about what was going on."

"Who was that?" asked Voss sceptically.

"Julia."

They stared at him hesitantly—even Portmore looked doubtful. Then Jeffroll's trembling hand brought up the revolver again.

"That's a lie! Julia didn't know anything—"

"That's why she wrote to me," said the Saint. "The letter's in my breast pocket—why don't you read it?"

Portmore took it out and passed it over.

"Is that her writing?"

Jeffroll nodded.

"My God," he said stupidly.

Voss took the letter from him, glanced through it, and handed it to Portmore. They looked at each other rather foolishly. Portmore dropped the letter on the desk in front of Weems, who turned it over with a limp hand and rubbed the place where his chin would have been if he had had a chin. An awkward kind of silence settled upon the congregation and scratched itself reflectively, as Job might have done on discovering a new and hitherto unsuspected boil.

Weems was the first to break it.

"That does seem to make things look a little bit different," he admitted, gazing vacantly at the inkwell.

Portmore cleared his throat.

"What was your story again?" he asked.

The Saint repeated it, in greater detail; and this time there were no interruptions. When it was finished, the four men looked at one another almost bashfully, like members of a Civic Reform committee who have caught each other buying nudist magazines. Something compromising had certainly been done. There had, perhaps, been a slight technical departure from the canons of good form and unblemished purity. But nothing, of of course, that had not been done with the most impeccable motives—that could not, naturally, be explained away with a few well-chosen words delivered in an austere and dignified and gentlemanly tone.

The other three turned automatically to Jeffroll, tacitly appointing him their spokesman; but perhaps this failure to respond immediately was understandable. The innkeeper had lowered his gun some minutes before, but the strained pallor of his face had altered only in degree.

"Then—then that means Garthwait *has* got her!" he stammered. "And if Yestering—if Yestering's gone over to him. . .or he may even have been the man who put Garthwait on to us—nobody else knew. Then it'll all have been for nothing—they'll use our work and divide the money. . . ." Suddenly, absurdly, his weak pathetic eyes turned to the Saint in helpless appeal. "What are we going to do?"

Simon smiled.

"I'd like to help you," he remarked lazily, "but I'm afraid it always cramps my style when I'm tied up."

"Sorry, old boy," drawled Captain Voss, for after all he was an officer and a gentleman, and had once played cricket for Oxford.

He stepped forward to undo the wire; but he had barely started fumbling with it when there was a scutter of quick lurching footsteps in the passage outside, and the door burst open with a crash.

It was the big black-haired man, Kane, who reeled in under the startled eyes of his companions. His shirt was ripped into two great trailing fragments, and he was clutching one side of his head dizzily. A small trickle of blood ran down his cheek from under the heel of his hand. He stared at the scene for a moment and then nodded weakly, sagging against the jamb of the door.

"Good," he said huskily. "We've still got one of the swine, anyhow."

"What the hell are you talking about?" demanded Portmore, with the reaction of his nerves indexed in the unnecessary loudness of his voice. "This fellow's all right—we made a mistake. What's happened?"

Kane glared at him with bloodshot eyes.

"Who made a mistake?" he rasped. "That pal of his—that Yankee thug—came out just now. After Yestering. He tried to hit me with the butt of his gun—did it, too. Laid me out. When I woke up I was lying in the hall—and he'd got away!"

Simon Templar wriggled his cramped limbs into the most comfortable position he could find, and tried to doze. There was really nothing to encourage him in this relaxation, for even the most ascetic of mortals might find it difficult to fall into a peaceful sleep while lying on a hard floor with his hands tied behind his back, and the mental serenity which might discomforts tolerable was noticeably lacking. The Saint scratched an itching part of his nose by rubbing it against the edge of the carpet, and contemplated the inscrutable capriciousness of Life.

Six hours ago he had been on the very point of removing himself from under the aim of a thunderbolt with masterly adroitness and aplomb. Five and three-quarter hours ago he might have been in complete control of the situation, with Jeffroll and the Four Horsemen sitting in eager humility at his feet while he planned and ordered their counterattack with crisp and inspiring efficiency. But during that vital quarter of an hour things had gung, as they had with Robert Burns' immortal mouse, distressingly agley.

They had, fairly enough, given him a chance to explain the conduct of Mr. Uniatz; but for once in his life the Saint felt as if he had been hit below the belt. He had been swatted with the full force of the sort of situation which he had himself so often used on Chief Inspector Teal, of Scotland Yard; and he admitted the poetic justice of the reversal without enjoying it any the more for that.

"The damn fool must have gone off his rocker," was the only thing he had honestly been able to say; and even now, five hours and three

quarters later, he could think of no other explanation. The psychological motivations of Hoppy's mind remained, as they always had been, darkness of the Styx. Down in the forest of Mr. Uniatz's fogbound brain, something occasionally stirred; and only God Almighty could predict what would develop from one of those rare bewildering feats of cerebral peristalsis.

Simon tried to derive some consolation from the fact that he was not dead yet.

On the other hand, he wasn't far off it. Major Portmore, in his bluff healthy way, had been the first to advocate a resumption of threats of violence; but he had been overruled. At least their previous conversation had done something to shake the meeting's confidence in itself, and to restore a tendency to sober and judicial thinking. And Julia Trafford's letter remained as one unshaken scrap of evidence in the Saint's favour. Jeffroll was sure it wasn't a forgery, and Voss admitted that to call it a forgery would have postulated an almost unbelievable amount of foresight and cunning on the Saint's part. Weems said: "Oh, absolutely. But—" and continued to stare vacuously at his finger-nails. Kane, with his head still bloody and aching from the impact of the butt of Hoppy's Betsy on his temple, was pardonably inclined to side with Portmore; but Jeffroll had lost some of the fire which had temporarily wiped out his natural self. During the argument, a little more information came out. The big moment, it appeared, was actually scheduled for that very night: everything had been done, the work finished, everything prepared, and Yestering in his lawful capacity of a solicitor had visited the prison the previous afternoon to warn his client. The Saint listened quietly, co-ordinating what he heard; and his veins tingled. It was too late for the hotel confederacy to turn back, and they would gain nothing by doing so. Luck had timed his arrival at the Clevely Arms on the very peak of eventfulness; but whether that luck was good or bad seemed to be highly doubtful.

"What's the use of finding out where Julia is?" Jeffroll summed up the situation. "Even if we knew we were getting the truth. Garthwait told us what'd happen if we tried to get her back; and I believe he'd be capable of it. I'd rather lose everything than risk that."

"What about the police?"

Portmore suggested awkwardly, but the innkeeper shook his head.

"Garthwait's threat would still hold good—he'd be all the more vicious. Besides, if they got him, he'd be sure to let out the rest of it, just for revenge. That'd mean we should all suffer. There's no need for all of you to be sacrificed—oh, I know you're going to say you don't care, but I wouldn't allow it. No. We can still go on, and get Julia back in exchange for B. W.... And after that, if we've still got this fellow, we may be able to drive another bargain in exchange for him."

His grim hurt eyes turned back to the Saint with a sober implacable resentment that was perhaps more terrible than his first frantic passion; and Simon Templar remembered that look, and Kane's significant grunt of acquiescence, during all those hours in which he had nothing else to do but estimate his own nebulous prospects of survival.

They had at least allowed him to eat—a plate of cold meat and somewhat withered-looking salad had been brought to him at two o'clock. His hands had been untied; but Kane and Portmore—Portmore re-possessed of his shot-gun—had stood over him while he ate it. The Saint had no doubt that Portmore would have had a fatal accident with the gun—"not knowing it was loaded"—if he had made any attempt to escape; and he saved his strength for a better opportunity. Neither of the men spoke a word while he was eating, and for once Simon had no time to spare on polishing the lines of backchat with which he would ordinarily have amused himself in goading his jailers to the verge of homicide—he was wise enough to know that homicide must be already close enough to the forefront of their minds. After the meal was finished, his wrists were bound again, and he was left to resume his uncomfortable contemplations.

Rolling over on his back and squinting up, he could watch time creeping round the face of the clock on the mantelpiece. Five o'clock went to six, six to seven, seven to eight. From time to time he experimented with different schemes for releasing himself; but the wire with which he had been bound was strong and efficiently tied, and his movements only served to tighten it till it cut into his flesh. He would cheerfully have giv-

en a hundred pounds for a cigarette, and another hundred for a tankard of beer. Eight o'clock crawled on to nine. He began to suffer another acute physical discomfort which had always been romantically ignored in all the stories he had read about people who were tied up and kept prisoner for prolonged periods. . . .

It was past ten o'clock when his captors returned. They wore the shabby trousers and drab shirts in which he had first met them; but the whiteness of their arms no longer puzzled him, for there is no sunshine underground.

Jeffroll went over to the door of the big built-in safe and unlocked it. He turned a switch, and an electric bulb lit up inside. There were no shelves behind the door, but where the shelves should have been he saw a black emptiness and the first rung of a ladder. The Saint was not startled, for that was what he had more or less guessed last night. Even the electric light did not surprise him; he had been putting the final touches to his theory when he looked for the cable that tapped the cross-country grid, and he was sure that the stolen current provided heavier labour besides surreptitious lighting.

The innkeeper turned back and inspected his wrists and ankles again to reassure himself that the Saint was still securely trussed.

"For the last time, will you tell us the truth?" he asked, and there was a hoarseness in his voice that seemed to be resisting a temptation to turn the demand into an appeal.

"I've told you the truth," said the Saint angrily, "and I can't alter it. I'm sorry for you, but you hurt my feelings and I hate being tied up. When I get out of here I'm afraid I shall have to charge you a lot of money for all the fun you've had out of being such a blithering fathead."

"If you get out," said Portmore unpleasantly.

He was carrying a long coil of flex and a couple of sticks of dynamite, and these things answered yet another of the few remaining questions in the Saint's mind. To blow up the tunnel after its work was done would effectively solve the problem of delaying pursuit and hampering the tracing of the rescuers while they extended their flying start to really useful dimensions.

The men passed through the steel door and went down the ladder, disappearing one

by one. Presently they had all gone, but the safe door was left open and the electric light burned dimly at the top of the dark shaft.

Simon twisted again at his bonds, gritting his teeth at the self-inflicted torture. After a while he felt his hands throbbing and going numb as the tightening metal cut off the circulation; but still he was no nearer to freedom. And no kindly accident had placed a pair of wire-cutters within his reach. He lay back at last breathlessly, and considered his fate as calmly as he could. Julia Trafford, who might have helped him, was kidnapped; Hoppy Uniatz had vanished on the trail of some crazy and incomprehensible inspiration. Nobody else knew where he was. Barring one of those miracles on which his career had already made so many arrogant demands, he could look ahead and see the doors opening for his last and most adventurous journey.

How soon would it be time to go?

Probably there would still be a little more work for the men who had gone into the tunnel to do, a few final preparations to make for the triumphal moment. By this time it was twenty minutes to eleven. Between then and midnight it would happen almost certainly. He watched the minute hand crawl maddeningly up the dial of the clock, begin to drop equally slowly down the other side...

Somebody walked with distinctly audible caution down the passage and stopped outside the door, breathing loudly. The handle rattled faintly, but the door had been locked on the inside when Jeffroll and company came in. There was a brief pause; and then a strident whisper grated through the panels.

"Is dat you, boss?"

"Good old Hoppy!" gasped the Saint joyfully.

He was not altogether without the power of movement: humping himself inelegantly across the floor like a sort of caterpillar he was able to reach the door, and then, on his knees in front of it, he managed to detach the key with his teeth and push it under the door with his feet. Hoppy unlocked the door and stood beaming down at him like a schoolboy who has come home with a prize.

"Hi," said Mr. Uniatz, in comradely greeting.

He stepped forward and untied the Saint as casually as he would have offered him a light for a cigarette; and it

only needed this casualness to remind Simon that this complacently grinning bonehead was, after all, the cause of more than half the trouble.

"Where the bloody hell have you been?" he demanded, with an ominous cooling off of his first grateful enthusiasm.

Mr. Uniatz blinked at him reproachfully, like a dog who has proudly laid a fresh-killed rat at his master's feet, only to receive a clout over the ear. Something, Mr. Uniatz began to suspect, seemed to have come between him and the Boss. The perfect harmony which had hitherto bound them together, their *zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl* as the Germans so succinctly put it, seemed to have come unstuck.

"Well, boss, I listen outside de door," he said, with a generous attempt to clear up the entire misunderstanding in a sentence.

"Outside what door?" asked the Saint patiently.

"Outside dis door here," said Mr. Uniatz, no less patiently—he felt that for the first time in their acquaintanceship his deity, the boss, was found wanting in rudimentary intelligence. "I hear de udder guys have got de snatch on Julia, an' you told me dis mornin' de attorney was in de racket. So when de guy comes out I bean de guy wit' my Betsy an' go after de guy," explained Mr. Uniatz, making everything translucently clear.

Fortunately the Saint had inside information which enabled him to distinguish one guy from another; but this was about as much as he did understand.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "When I came in here, you followed and listened outside the door?"

"Yes, boss."

"And nobody caught you at it."

"I didn't t'ink about dat, boss," said Hoppy worriedly, as if he feared that he might yet be caught in that past act of eavesdropping.

The Saint wiped his forehead. He could remember himself wishing that he could listen outside that door, and discarding the idea as hopelessly impracticable; but a fool had ambled in where a Saint had certainly feared to tread.

"And you heard about Julia being kidnapped?"

"Yes, boss."

"You got steamed up about it, and pushed off to give somebody the works."

"Well, boss—"

"And then the lawyer came out."

"Yeah. He came t'ru de dinin'-room. I got after him, an' de udder guy tries to stop me; so I bean him wit' my Betsy."

"And then what?' '

"De lawyer is gettin' into his heap, an' he don't know I beaned de udder guy. So I climb up in de rumble seat, an' we hit de grit."

Simon nodded, chafing his hands to ease the pain of returning circulation.

"Where did you go?"

"I dunno, boss. Foist we go down to de harbour, an' dis guy gets in a boat an' blows off. I can't find anudder boat to follow him, an' I guess he'd of seen me comin' on de water anyhow, so I sit in de car an' wait. He goes off to a yacht outside an' goes on board. He stays on de yacht t'ree-four hours, an' I gotta toist like nobody's business, an 'de fishin' guys start lookin' at me an' one of 'em comes up an' asks if I want to rent a boat. After a bit de guy comes back from de yacht, an' I duck back in de rumble an' we screw. We go maybe six miles, an' he turns in de drive of a house dat's got a board outside For Sale. Maybe de house is for sale at dat, because I take a gander t're de windows an' it ain't got no foinitchure inside. De red-haired guy is inside wit' a coupla gophers; an' I go in t'ru de door, which is not locked, an' dey lamp my Betsy an' stick 'em up."

"They didn't try to shoot it out with you?"

"Say, when I get a hist on a guy he don't have no chance to shoot it out," said Hoppy indignantly. "So I pull deir teet'—lookit, I got de rods here." He fished about in his pockets and produced an assortment of weapons which explained the curious bulges that Simon had noticed on his person. "Well, I say: 'What youse guys done wit' Julia?' Dey don't say nut'n."

"So what?' '

Mr. Uniatz scratched his head.

"Well, boss, I give dem a massage."

Simon's fingers had recovered sufficiently for him to be able to get out a cigarette. He lighted it without interrupting—it seemed better not to inquire too closely into the methods of persuasion to which an old-timer like Hoppy Uniatz would naturally have turned to squeeze information out of reluctant mouths.

"I have to work a long time," said Mr. Uniatz hesitantly. "But after a bit, when I get started on de lawyer, he

squawks."

The Saint's irritation had subsided again. He was hanging on Hoppy's narrative with a growing ecstasy of excitement.

"You've found out where Julia is?"

"Yes, boss," said Mr .Uniatz sheepishly. "She's upstairs in dis empty house all de time—all I gotta do is go an' look for her."

Simon stared at him for a moment; and then he leaned back and went limp with silent laughter. There was something so climactically cosmic about the picture he saw that it was some time before he could trust his voice again.

"What did you do then —apologise for troubling them?"

"Well, boss, I put 'em all in de flivver an' we come back here. I send Julia up to her room when I come in, an' I look for you. De udder guys are still tied up outside."

The Saint got up and walked silently about the room. The time was racing away now, but he expected to hear the warning explosion of Portmore's dynamite before the rescue party returned, and he wanted to get everything worked out before the final showdown.

"Did you find out anything else while you were giving these guys your—er—massage?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Mr. Uniatz, not without pride. "I finished de job."

He told everything that he had learnt; and Simon listened to him and filled in all the gaps in his own knowledge. The last details of the most amazing plot he had ever stumbled upon fell into place, and he knew the extent of his own sublime good fortune.

"Did you get hold of this cheque-book?" he asked; and Hoppy produced it.

He also took over two of the automatics which Hoppy had brought back with him as trophies, and carefully checked the loading of both of them before he put them away, one in each side pocket of his coat. Then he lighted himself another cigarette; and he was smiling. He punched Hoppy thoughtfully in the stomach.

"Next time I make any rude remarks about your brain, I hope you'll hang something on my chin," he said. "All the boodle in this party belongs to you, and I hope you won't spend it on riotous living. Now shove off and keep an eye on the birds outside while I'm busy. Recite some of your poetry to

them and cheer them up."

There was no need for him to go down into the tunnel, but he was curious to see the amazing work that Jeffroll and company had done, with his own eyes. The ladder inside the safe door took him down through a short shaft into a broad natural cave, and at once he saw how circumstances had helped the rescuers with their undertaking. Some subterranean river, long since dried up, had done half their work for them; but even so he had to admire the thoroughness with which they had carried on that prehistoric excavation.

On the other side of the cavern, which was lighted at intervals by bulbs slung from the low roof, he saw a hydraulic lift at the foot of another shaft that disappeared vertically upwards into darkness; and he guessed that this was the route by which the excavated earth was removed. At the top of this shaft he knew, without looking for it, that he would have found the door cunningly concealed in the timberings and plaster of the outside wall of the inn through which the soil was tipped out into the lorry that stood in the garage close up to that very wall. Running away from the lift into the depths of the cave was a pair of rusty lines professionally laid on sleepers. A small mine truck stood on the rails close to the lift; that was how the earth was brought up from the head of the tunnel, and it would be the explanation of the strange rumblings underground which had troubled Julia Trafford and brought him on to the trail of the mystery.

Following the guiding rails, he came at the end of the cavern to the beginning of the artificial tunnel. A mound of shining machinery abandoned close by he was able to identify as some kind of electric excavating drill which had made this terrific task possible to such a small number of workers: the heavily sheathed power cables, still left in place, beside the truck lines, confirmed all his guesses.

After a moment's hesitation he started into the tunnel. It was barely six feet high, so that he had to stoop slightly to move along it. Throughout the length he saw, it was neatly and expertly buttressed; but all these things were possible with an experienced engineer, which he knew Jeffroll to be, in charge, and four intelligent confederates to help him, of whom two at least

must be retired sapper officers. The same electric bulbs dangled at long intervals along the sap, so that in between them there were patches of deep gloom practically amounting to complete darkness. Even so, the technique that must have been required to bring out the far end of the tunnel exactly under a pre-determined cell in Larkstone Prison was one of those astounding exercises of scientific ingenuity at which the Saint, as an uninitiated layman, would always have to gape in speechless awe.

As he moved deeper into the warren, he began to pick his steps more cautiously, until he was travelling almost noiselessly, a mere foot at a time. Then he heard a patter of scurrying feet somewhere ahead of him; and Portmore's voice boomed hollowly down the echoes with eerie distinctness.

"Look out!"

Instinctively the Saint spun off the track and pressed himself against the wall, freezing into immobility in the middle of the deepest patch of darkness he could find. The running men came nearer; and then there was a sudden crash of sound that thundered down the tunnel like the crack of doom. A blast of air like a tornado struck him down the whole side of his body, lifted him off his feet and hurled him a dozen yards down the passage as if he had been hit by an express train.

He struggled up again, deafened and half-stunned, and listened to the patter of falling stones loosened from the roof by the detonation. All the lights had been shattered by the explosion, and when he felt around for the truck lines to get his bearings he found them half buried in the debris. But the buttressing had been good, and the thousands of tons of earth which might have sunk down from overhead had not fallen.

He heard Jeffroll's voice now, startlingly near.

"Are we all right?"

"I am," said Voss; and one by one the other chimed in reassuringly.

There was a sixth voice among the responses, a voice which the Saint had not heard before. A moment later somebody switched on an electric torch, and the owner of the voice was picked up by the beam, scarcely three yards away—a fleshy sallow-faced man who still wore the drab uniform of His Majesty's prisons.

Simon felt in his pocket and drew out one of his guns;

his other hand slipped out a tiny flashlight from his breast pocket—it looked very much like a cheap fountain pen, and it had escaped observation when he was searched.

He drew a careful bead on the other torch, and at that range he was quite an accurate shot. The crisp smack of the report as he pressed the trigger synchronised with the sudden return of utter darkness; and then the beam of his own flashlight stabbed out and swept over the five men.

"I hope you will all say your prayers before you ask to die," he murmured politely; and then he turned his light on the sixth stranger again. There might be a few minor gaps in his acquaintance with the underworld, but this man was not exactly of the underworld, and his photograph had appeared in every national newspaper in England for six consecutive days during a certain week eighteen months ago. "Mr. Bellamy Wage, I believe?" said the Saint.

They were so stunned that he had the stage to himself but the Saint had no complaint to make about this, for there were times when he liked talking.

"You were sentenced at the old Bailey to fourteen years' penal servitude on one charge of forgery and two charges of conspiracy to defraud. The Neovision Radio Company went down the drain to the tune of nearly two million quid, and about a million and a half of that was never accounted for except on the general theory that you must have hidden it away somewhere. Altogether you seem to have been pretty smooth at collecting potatoes; and if somebody had given you the wire to pull your freight a month earlier, I'm sure you'd have turned up later as the hell of a big shot somewhere in South America and had the whale of a time on your old-age pension."

His torch-light panned warningly over the rescuers again, and nobody moved.

"But even when you were caught, you weren't finished," he went on chattily. "You had Yestering, a smart crook lawyer; and when he couldn't find enough perjurers to lie you out of the dock you gave him another idea. Through him, you offered a reward of half a million pounds to anyone who could get you out of Larkstone; and you would pay all the expen-

ses, signing the cheques he brought when he visited you. He got hold of these men—trained engineers, down on their luck, and willing to take a sporting risk for a fortune. They did this work; but Yestering was too greedy. He wanted more than his fee. When everything was nearly ready, he got hold of a gorilla named Garthwait to try and muscle the others out of here—the idea was that Garthwait should bring off the actual rescue, and claim to have done all the work from the start, and then the two of them would split the reward. Jeffroll and the others knew they were up against it, but Garthwait did not quite succeed in scaring them off, so Jeffroll's niece was kidnapped last night and held for a hostage. She was to be returned in exchange for you, and Garthwait was still to go on and claim the beauty prize. Unfortunately for everybody except me, I butted in."

Bellamy Wage clenched his fists. He was pale and trembling with fear.

"Who are you?" he asked shakily.

"I am Simon Templar, known as the Saint; and I expect it will be fun for you to meet an honest man after all these twisters you've had round you. I've done a lot of good work on this business myself," said the Saint modestly, "and put up with a good deal of rudery and discomfort, for which someone is going to have to console me. Jeffroll has misunderstood me from the beginning. I suppose there was some excuse for him, but I don't know." He turned the ray of his troch slightly. "By the way, brother, Julia is back."

The innkeeper stood looking at him with his mouth twitching mutely.

"That happens to be true," said the Saint quietly. "My friend—the Yankee thug, I think you called him—rescued her and brought her back. You'll be able to check up on that. And now let's move on—there's no scenery here, and I have an aunt somewhere around who is calling me in a loud voice."

He shepherded the party back along the tunnel, after taking over Jeffroll's revolver—the others were unarmed. At that stage of the proceedings he was making no foolish mistakes, and his flock had no chance whatever to dispute his orders. When the last of them had come up the ladder into the office, he sat down at the desk and laid out his armoury on the blotter.

"You can go and say hullo to Julia, Uncle Martin," he said. "We'll wait for your report."

He waited, tranquilly smoking a cigarette. Weems sat down in another chair and stared at the carpet. Voss finicked with his moustache. Portmore breathed stertorously. Kane leaned against the wall, glowering at him in sulky silence.

Jeffroll came back, and the four men turned to look at him. The answer was in his face, before he nodded.

"It's true," he said. "Julia's back. Mr. Templar—"

"You owe me an apology," said the Saint gently. "Isn't that it? And another apology to Hoppy Uniatz." He sighed. "But after all, what's an apology? Will the Commissioners of Inland Revenue accept it in payment of our income tax? Can we pass a bit of it over the bar and get a drink? No. Therefore I'm afraid we must have more."

"What are you going to do?" sobbed Bellamy Wage, in a kind of panic.

The Saint smiled.

"I'm going to ask you to do a little extra writing, dear old bird," he said. "Here is the cheque-book on your old-age pension, removed from the custody of Comrade Yestering. In case your memory is getting dim, the account is in the name of Isledon. The reward you offered was five hundred thousand. According to plan, it should have worked out at a hundred thousand each, but now it'll have to be split seven ways. That is seventy-one thousand four hundred and twenty-eight pounds eleven shillings and fivepence each, but you can make my share payable to Hoppy Uniatz as well—he's earned it. And you boys," said the Saint, glancing over the other conspirators and shuffling his guns persuasively, "are going to take your loss and like it, being thankful that Hoppy and I aren't naturally avaricious."

Bellamy Wage wrote according to instructions; and Simon picked up one of the cheques and led him outside, to where Mr. Uniatz was waiting patiently beside his carload of captives.

"Here's your transport," he said, "and I believe there's a motor-boat waiting for you in the harbour and your own yacht outside. And I hope you'll be seasick. . . . Get rid of these blisters, Hoppy, and come back for a celebration. You must be dying of thirst, but they've paid their passage and they're entitled to the ride."

When he returned to the office he found five philosophical men examining their cheques. Portmore was the spokesman.

"How about a drink?" he suggested gruffly; and the Saint was delighted.

"I'm glad we got things straightened out without bloodshed," he said. "I like a good amateur; but there were moments when I thought you didn't appreciate me."

"What do you think Garthwait and Yestering will do?" asked Jeffroll.

He asked this some time later, after Hoppy had returned from his mission of speeding the ungodly on their way. Mr. Uniatz, reclining in a corner with a bottle of Johnnie Walker all to himself, had been immersed in a sort of coma, with a scowl of hideous agony on his brow from which Simon deduced that he was thinking about something; but at the sound of Jeffroll's question he awoke sufficiently to reply.

"Dey won't do nut'n," he said, closing the argument to his own satisfaction.

"I don't know," Jeffroll demurred. "They're bound to be pretty vindictive. Ever since Garthwait first came here we've been ready to clear out at short notice, and now we can afford to go—"

Hoppy continued to shake his head.

"Dey won't do nut'n," he repeated emphatically. "Mr. Templar tells me to get rid of 'em, an' what de boss says goes."

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded the Saint faintly.

"I mean I take 'em for a ride, like ya told me, boss. We take de motor-boat, an' when we're outside de harbour I haul out my Betsy an' give dem de woiks. Dey won't do nut'n." Mr. Uniatz stretched himself complacently. "Say, juse guys mind if I take dis bottle upstairs an' finish it? I just finished de last voice of a pome I was makin' up on de way back, an' I gotta tell it to Julia before I forget."

sydelle

by Brad Steiger

ERIC JOHNSON had expected tongues to wag when he married Sydelle Woode; but, as he was quick to say in that rich colloquial speech of his: "I don't give a hairy rat's ear what people say about me marrying a girl young enough to be my daughter!"

His pronouncement of disinterest, of course, didn't stop people from talking. Sydelle was a tall, blue-eyed blonde, who had left a string of rejected suitors strung out across the county. Nothing could deter those young bucks from buying each other a lot of beers and cursing the wealth that made an "old man" of fifty more desirable than their youth.

And no decree on earth could prevent certain ladies of the village from gossipping about an old fool who had been too busy getting rich to get married any younger. It was a matter of common knowledge, these ladies could tell anyone who expressed the least amount of interest, that

How often have you heard talk about "that old fool who married a girl young enough to be his daughter"..... There are times when these December (or October) and May marriages have a chance—if the two share common interests, or have a less subjective approach to the problems and responsibilities of married life. But what happens when he marries a Sydelle?

there was one particular maiden lady who had denied herself nuptials with any other man until Eric Johnson had got ready to get married. With soft clucks of their tongues, they would tell of her lonely nights of unfulfilled desire, the gradual deterioration of her beauty, her refusal to have a life with another man—all the sacrifices that had been for nothing.

But none of these things bothered Eric Johnson. By day he had the prosperous Johnson Stockyards to boss. By night he had the eager body of a young woman to teach him, at long last, what life was really all about.

His cronies gave him the business whenever he stopped by Bill's Place for a beer after a hard day loading steers for Chicago. He shrugged, grinned, almost looked forward to it.

"Hey, old man," said Henry Mueller with exaggerated surprise. "It amazes me to see you on your feet. I thought you'd be in a wheel chair after three months of trying to keep up with that young heifer."

"You can't keep a real man down," Eric said, puffing out his barrel chest.

"But can *you* keep a real woman down?" Little Bob Hankins asked. The question brought a chorus of laughter from groups scattered about the tavern, and Eric blushed furiously.

"The boys tell me that you've been eating prairie oysters to help your get up and go," Doc Pearson said as he rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Didn't think an enlightened man like you would swallow that old wives' tale."

"Don't see how he could swallow prairie oysters!" Little Bob said, nearly doubling over at his own wit.

Eric took it all. Grinning like a big, good-natured bear, blushing like a schoolboy, he picked up the tab for his friends and hurried home to Sydelle.

He watched her for a minute from the porch door as she worked over the thick steaks on the frying pan. He could feel his pulse quicken as he took in the supple grace and feline movement of her body. She had dressed in tight black toreador slacks and a red sweater. She had curves in places where some women didn't even have places.

Sydelle turned at the sound of the opening porch door, offered her full lips for a welcome kiss. Eric drew her to him, wrapped heavy arms around her in an affectionate bear hug.

"Watch it, Big Lover man," she laughed, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "You'll break your lettle woman in half."

Eric dropped his arms. "I'm sorry, Sydelle. Lord, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Oh, I was just teasing, Big Lover Man. If you ever break me in half, it won't be from hugging me around the middle."

Eric blushed. He had never been a prude, and he'd had some paid women in Chicago, but sometimes the frank way Sydelle talked embarrassed him, even when they were alone.

They sat to their steaks, and Eric gloried in his young wife's culinary skills. She had laid a full-table, blue-ribbon spread out tonight. Eric fought a brief moment of panic as he tried to remember whether or not he had forgotten any anniversary. Sydelle was awful fussy about those little anniversaries. April 13th was the first night he'd asked her out. She had hired on as a secretary-bookkeeper in his stockyards just two days before. June 10th, was the first time that he'd said he loved her. Oh, yes, he couldn't forget May 4th. First night he kissed her. But what day was special in October? They hadn't had an October together, yet. Then he remembered it was Friday night. Sydelle always made the weekends special. Eric had even taken to letting Mike handle things at the yards on Saturday so that he could spend the entire weekend with Sydelle.

"Hurry up with that pie, Lover man," Sydelle was saying huskily. "We're not going to *eat* all night."

And it wasn't much later —before Eric's supper had even had a chance to digest —that Sydelle was demonstrating what she'd *like* them to do all night.

Monday morning opened to howling October winds and sleet. Eric felt as though he had camped out on the bare ground. He would have to see to putting up the storm windows pretty soon.

"Gosh-o-fishhooks but it's cold in here," Eric said as he swung his barefeet out of the king-sized bed. "And damp. Don't these covers feel damp?"

Sydelle yawned. "They're just cold. So am I. Warm me up."

She extended her arms. Her pink tongue curled out like a beckoning finger.

"Not. . .not now, Dearest," Eric said. He ached in every joint. A demon was poised

over the most sensitive part of his brain, driving in spikes with a mallet. "I have to get to work. Besides, I have a sore throat."

"Oh, Big Lover Man," Sydelle pouted. You're the boss. You can be late."

He couldn't disappoint Sydelle.

By that afternoon his throat felt as though he could cough fire. He decided to skip lunch and walk downtown to try and catch Doc Pearson before he left for his rounds at the county hospital.

"Well, well," Doc smiled as he appraised the haggard features of the big man his nurse ushered into the office. "I told you prairie oysters wouldn't help.

"Knock it off, Doc," Eric growled. "I don't feel so good."

"Ouch," Doc winced. "Sounds like your voice box is lined with sandpaper."

Doc Pearson examined him carefully, listened to his chest for a long time. "Bad cold that could keep right on going into pneumonia if you aren't careful. You'd better head for home and bed—alone."

Eric scowled at his friend with red-rimmed eyes.

"I'm not joshing you at Bill's place now," Doc returned the glare. "This is my office and I'm your doctor and I'm telling you to slack off a bit. Don't try to make up for thirty years in three months."

"Ain't never been sick a day in my life," Eric said as he dressed. "Aint never missed a day of work. Send me a bill for your advice."

Doc shook his head as Eric refused a prescription for an antibiotic and stormed out the door. He had angered his big friend when he had only intended to caution him. Eric seemed to have forgotten about the slight murmur they had heard from his heart when he took out that big insurance policy just before his marriage in August.

"Poor, Baby," Sydelle cooed as she brought Eric a huge bowl of steaming broth that night at dinner. "Why didn't you come home instead of working all day? Your lover would've taken care of you."

"Aint never missed a day of work," Eric rasped, " 'sides, didn't want to bother you."

"Silly, it's no bother to take care of my Big Lover Man. You just sit and sip that broth and after a while we'll have us some of the best **me-**

dicine Nature has."

Eric looked at his young bride. Could she be serious? "We-we better not tonight... had we?"

Sydelle smiled and winked. "It cures all ills."

"I don't want you to catch this cold," he objected.

But later, when Sydelle sat on the edge of the big bed in her baby doll pajamas, stroking her long blonde hair, Eric couldn't help but feel that to deny her would be to deny his manhood. When it was over, he rolled over into a pit darker than a hundred midnights.

When he awoke the next morning, he again experienced the weird sensation of having lain on the ground all night. The bedclothes felt cold and clammy. The demon is his skull had nailed his brain down so that it could barely function. Another fiend had wrapped chains around his chest and tightened them until he could scarcely breathe. With a supreme effort of will, Eric managed to sit up and swing his barefeet over the side of the bed. The floor felt icy and damp. It had managed to sleet again that night, and Eric felt as though he had slept exposed to the storm.

"You don't suppose it would be leaking in at night, do you?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Of course not, Lover," opening her eyes. "You checked the shingles before we were married."

Eric got out of bed before she got romantic again. He couldn't...he absolutely couldn't this morning. He opened the closet door for his work clothes, stooped to pick up Sydelle's new fur coat—the one he had bought her in Chicago. Funny it lay there on the floor. Sydelle was so fussy about it. He hung it back on the heavy hanger, grabbed his coveralls, wondered how he'd ever get through the day.

He didn't.

Sydelle found him beside the over-turned kitchen table, the smashed coffe urn, and the broken breakfast dishes. When he regained consciousness, he was in bed and Doc Pearson was there bending over him, listening to his chest.

"Damn fool," Doc growled at him the moment he noticed his eyelids fluttering. "Why aint you in bed like I told you? You forgot all about that heart murmur? You have any idea how hard pneumonia is on a fluttering ticker? Especially an old ticker that's just getting used to"

—he paused, glanced at Sydelle—"new exertions."

Eric opened his mouth to answer, got a thermometer thrust between his lips.

"Now I want you to stay in bed and keep warm and not budge your big stubborn hide out from under the covers. I've already jabbed you with some penicillin, and I'll be back first thing in the morning so you can turn the other cheek."

Doc waved bood-bye; and Sydelle flopped beside Eric's outstretched bulk, cooing endearments. He was glad when she left the room without prescribing any of her "medicine." He could not have risen to the test.

That day he had time to just lie back and think. For a while, he thought about how things were going at the stockyards, and then his thoughts became all jumbled up on account of the fever and he thought about a lot of funny things. Like what the boys would say when they found out he was sick. How they'd tease him about Sydelle wearing him out. He thought about how lucky he was being married to a wonderful girl like Sydelle. Then he wondered for the thousandth time what she could possibly see in a big ugly bear like him. He thought about the big insurance policy he took out on himself before they were married. Somehow he seemed to remember it being Sydelle's idea. He remembered how funny it was finding a bottle of sleeping tablets in the kitchen that morning before he passed out. Where had they come from? He didn't think Sydelle had any trouble sleeping. *He* sure didn't. Then his brain started swirling around until the thinking part of him seemed to be outside his body. He fell asleep.

"Wake up, Big Lover Man. Nice broth for dinner then you can go back to sleep until morning."

Always Big Lover Man. Never Darling or Honey or Dear. Steaming broth. He thought of the bottle of sleeping tablets in the kitchen.

When she went to get him the magazine he had asked for, Eric got up and flushed most of the broth down the stool. "I can't eat anymore," he said when she returned. At her insistence he mouthed a couple spoonfuls. It tasted all right. He was being a fool. "Maybe I should sleep in the guest room tonight."

"Yeah," Eric agreed. "Don't want you catching this bug." Lord! It pained his throat just to push a few

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words past it.

He closed his eyes as Sydelle shut the door. He felt as if he could sleep forever.

Forever.

The thought kept him from lapsing into a completely sound sleep, but he finally dozed off for what may have been a few minutes or several hours. He awoke feeling cold and damp. The bitter wind that wailed outside the house seemed to be chilling him to the marrow. The sleet that pelted the window panes seemed to be stinging his bare flesh.

He raised eyelids that seemed to have been seared with flame. At first he thought it some fever-fed hallucination that made the windows at the foot of the bed appear to be open, their drapes riding the October gale. With a sudden movement that tightened the firey chains across his chest, he reached for the bed lamp, managed to snap it on.

His blankets lay piled on the floor. His pajama top had been unbuttoned. The sleet, driven by the icy wind, was slicing at his naked chest.

Sydelle sat in a chair, wrapped warmly in her new fur coat. Her cold blue eyes glittered in the lamp's sudden glare. She had been watching him die.

the third brother

by Wenzell Brown

MY NAME is Mike Stranger. The outfit for which I work is so hush-hush that it's never had any official existence to say nothing of an official name. Within the inner circles it's known as Triple V. V stands for violence, for vengeance and for victory too. Maybe that's the significance of Triple V, but there's a more practical purpose for the name. Agents often are unknown to one another and the three V's form an easy code, one that can be signalled in a score of different ways.

Originally Triple V came into being in World War II. The United States government dared not engage in counter-espionage in neutral countries for fear of international complications, but American business men could operate on their own, suffering the consequences if they were caught. Before the war's end, the network of Triple V

When you work for the Triple V, *as Mike Stranger does, you live "in a tight little world of violence and intrigue". And in the shadow of death... Stranger is one of the small group of Professionals working fulltime for the* Triple V, *fighting fire with fire—on behalf of the rest of us... Wenzell Brown, a frequent contributor to* SM, *is the author of more than 30 books, dealing with the problems of our young—in the cities we do not know....*

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spread throughout the world. After the peace treaty, the activities waned, but with the cold war, they sprang to renewed life. Most of the members of Triple V are ordinary business men, sworn to secrecy and called upon only on rare occasions to perform acts of patriotism. I'm an exception. I'm one of the nucleus of full time professionals whose sole duty is to serve the organization.

I live in a tight little world of violence and intrigue. More than once I've been called on to frighten a man, to dynamite a factory or to kill. But my current problem was to keep a man alive. That man was a Cuban named Hector Castro Melendez. And the man who plotted his assassination was none other than his half-brother, the symbol of entrenched Communist power in the Western Hemisphere, Fidel Castro.

Treachery, the double-cross and murder are integral parts of espionage. An agent has to become callous. All the same, my stomach churned at the thought of deliberate fratricide for political advantage. I guess I'm not as tough as I'd thought, nowhere near as cynical as the bearded dictator in Havana.

Jope was my boss, and Jope had told me the story last night. He didn't quite know whether to believe it or not. There had never been a time when Triple V didn't have agents close to Castro. Even so the name of Hector Castro Melendez had never entered into any of their reports until a few months ago. Hector had lived all his life in Toledilla, a sugar cane village high in the Cuban mountains. Brothers Fidel and Raul had ignored him, virtually denied his existence. Then unexpectedly Hector had started to show up on the platforms of political rallies. Fidel had introduced him to the crowds, one hand on Hector's shoulder, the other about his waist, and hinted at an important role for him in the Communist regime. The crowds had obediently roared their approval and Hector had retreated without ever speaking.

And now our secret listening posts had received word that Hector was in New York, ostensibly to buy munitions from underworld sources, in actuality to be cut down by an assassin so that the blame could be laid on the CIA and the Cubans in exile. Brother Hector was to become a martyr to bolster Fidel Castro's declining power. The clamor set up by Hector's murder was designed to

send an electric shock of hate against the United States throughout Latin America and to make Castro the rallying point for a renewed Communist drive that might well be the fore-runner of a total war.

Our informants placed Hector in the swank Havana-Madrid Hotel in mid-Manhattan but they did not know under what name he was registered and could give only a general description of him. Moreover they had a suspicion that the man in the Havana-Madrid might be a plant and that the real Hector might be holed up somewhere else. Jope had been in a quandary. Triple V had no photographs of Hector and there was no member of the organization who was able to identify him. But such a person did exist. He was Professor William Winkler of Point Sable University. More than twenty-five years ago, Winkler had been a teacher of English in Toledilla. At that time, Hector, a lonely boy of fifteen, had formed a strong attachment for the young American.

I had driven throughout most of the night to reach the quaint New England college town. There I had learned that Winkler lived in a bungalow at the edge of the campus. I had routed him out of bed at four o'clock in the morning and explained the situation to him while his wife hovered in the background.

Winkler was a plump, fussy man, with blue eyes that danced behind rimless glasses, a comfortable paunch, a tonsure of white hair and a glistening pink scalp. Throughout the long return trip to New York, he chatted incessantly about Hector. Gradually a picture of Hector's boyhood took shape. He had been a simple, gullible but highly idealistic youth, not very intelligent but with some stubborn unbreakable quality within him. He had lived in the shadow of his younger brothers whom he had idolized but secretly resented. Hector had never liked Havana and had no interest in politics. He had preferred the quiet life of the *finca*. Yet, in Hector's more recent letters, Winkler had detected undertones of jealousy and a desire to share in Fidel's power.

We had arrived in Manhattan in mid-morning and had gone immediately to the lobby of the Havana-Madrid Hotel. Our watching post was two red plush chairs in a corner, partly concealed by potted palms but from which we had a clear view of the

rank of elevators. Despite the passage of years since he had seen Hector, Dr. Winkler was certain he'd recognize him on sight.

I wasn't so sure. We'd been here for four hours without a bite. Winkler's instructions were to avoid attracting attention, to signal me if Hector appeared and then to fade out of the picture without establishing contact. But Winkler didn't fit into the lush background of the lobby. He stood out like a uniformed mailman at a formal dinner party. In spite of all my warnings, he'd lean forward and stare every time an elevator debouched its human cargo. In between he'd sit bolt upright, fighting his desire to nod off. Sometimes he'd glance over at me and shake his head or purse his lips.

Any further attempt to control him would merely make him more conspicuous to a watcher, so it seemed to me the best thing to do was to put some distance between us. A magazine counter was set catti-cornered across from the reception desk; beside it loomed a red plastic and chrome colossus that dispensed soft drinks. I strolled over to it and inserted a coin that started the machine rumbling and groaning. A paper cup dropped downward and was pronged on metal fingers. Brown liquid foamed into it. Even though my back was turned to Winkler, I kept him in view all the time in the wall mirrors.

Behind me I was aware of the sounds of two elevators stopping simultaneously. I reached out automatically for the paper cup but, before I could touch it, a miniature hand clasped around it. A small boy stared up at me in round-eyed wonder. He was five or six with out-sized brown eyes and dark curly hair. The woman who came up beside him was young and slim, with eyes and hair that matched his. She wore a broad-brimmed tangerine-colored hat that, for a moment, blocked off Winkler's image which was reflected in the mirror.

She chided the boy who was already gulping the drink and apologized laughingly to me, while she dug in her purse for a coin. The byplay couldn't have taken more than ten seconds at the most. But that was long enough. When I turned back to Winkler, he was no longer straining forward. He was tilted back in his chair, very calm, very still, his hands loose on the arms, his head

drooping to one side, his eyes closed. The jacket of his seersucker suit was open and on the breast pocket of his white shirt a spreading flower of bright red had burst into bloom.

He was dead. I had no doubt of it. And somewhere close at hand was his assassin. I pressed back against the plastic and chrome dispenser and my gaze swept the lobby. The room was still filled with bustle and noise. As yet no one had noticed anything wrong. I glanced about the crowd, seeking some furtive movement, some sign of over-casualness or deliberate restraint. But I could catch no false note. Then I saw what I was looking for. Three men seemed to be walking together toward the circular door that led to the street. They passed through, but the last of the three swung abruptly away and the others made no recognition of his departure.

The dodge was an old one. A man who wishes to avoid detection simply attaches himself to a group, walking close to them, smiling but not speaking. If he is casual enough, the chances are that those to whom he has attached himself will fail to notice him and, if they do, they are unlikely to protest. A public place makes such proximity appear normal.

I hadn't seen much of the man, only his back. He was of medium height and slight of build. His summer suit was a neutral gray and his pale brown coconut-fibre hat could be duplicated in any men's shop throughout the city . . .

I hesitated, weighing my responsibility to Winkler against the importance of identifying his slayer. At this distance could I be absolutely certain that the tubby little professor was dead? My decision was made for me. A shrill scream sliced across the turmoil of the lobby and brought an aftermath of silence, broken only by the frenetic beat of a jukebox in the bar. It was the woman in the broad-brimmed hat who had screamed. One of her arms was outstretched, a finger pointing dramatically at Winkler. With her other arm she clutched the boy.

As though on cue, Winkler's body slumped, toppled to one side and rolled slowly from the chair. Even while I watched, I was moving, crossing the lobby in long strides.

I doubt if the man in the gray suit had a minute's start on me. But that is more than adequate for a

man to lose himself in the heart of a teeming city. I picked up his trail by luck, or perhaps I should say by his own ineptitude. Taxis were crawling through the heavy traffic of the street and my eyes darted from one to another. But I had an idea that my man, if he was what I thought him to be, would avoid taxis. Cabbies have long memories and they like to be on the right side of the law. In midtown New York, the safest means of excape from the scene of a crime is the subway. There is an anonymity about the subway rider. No one looks at him twice or is likely to remember his neighbor a minute after he leaves the train. Moreover the complex of the big station gives the man in flight an almost inexhaustible choice of excape routes.

If he'd been wise, my quarry would have selected one of the numerous stairways leading through office buildings to the platforms below. Instead he chose the covered entry in the island in the center of the street. What was more, he could not resist the temptation of one swift backward glance. The light was against me but the snarl of traffic had brought the lines of cars to a near stand-still. I rushed through them like a broken-field runner and went plunging past the grimy marquee and down the stairs. Fortunately no one notices a man running in the subway.

I had another glimpse of my quarry as he pushed through the turnstile. As I hurried forward, I fumbled in my pockets for the tokens I always keep there. I was not a dozen yards in back of my man when he cut down another stairway to a lower level, moving fast as though he sensed a pursuer at his heels. If I hadn't been so intent on watching him, I might have avoided the fiasco that followed. I didn't even see the fat woman in the Hawaiian print dress until I was right on top of her. I tried to swerve around her but I was too late. She was monstrous, with a great round face and billowing breasts. I had the suffocating sensation of plowing headfirst into a feather bed. She was knocked off balance but she didn't go down. As I backed away, she took a solid stance blocking my passage. She hadn't been hurt but she was mad as a hornet and had a piece of her mind to speak. I won't repeat her language but it certainly wasn't ladylike and,

to make sure I heard her through, she clutched at my lapels with fingers like pale bloated sausages.

At another time I might have been amused or even sheepish but right now I had no time for fat ladies. I chopped down at her wrist with the flat of my hand, not hard, but with enough force to make her give a yip of pain and let go. I was past her like a shot. Beneath me I heard the rumble of the uptown local. As I leapt down the final steps, the doors of the train inched to. I rushed across the platform and clawed at the rubber-clad steel but already the doors were firmly locked.

I looked up then at the man staring through the streaked glass panel. The crowd in the car was pressing so hard against him that I doubt he could have moved however much he might have wanted to. The gray suit and light brown hat might have belonged to any number of men, but there was something about his stance and the slope of his shoulders that convinced me he was the one whom I sought. His black eyes, bulbous as ripe olives, watched me without a flicker. His swarthy face was oval and thickened with flesh at the jowls. His lower lip was pendulant, his skin flabby, and his hairline, visible beneath his tilted hat, drew a straight line across his forehead.

The train was already in motion, so that I had only seconds in which to study the face of William Winkler's assassin but I knew it would be a long time before I forgot it. Something else I knew too. He had recognized me and studied my face as avidly as I had studied his. I was the one witness who could place him at the death scene. I was dangerous to him and that meant that I was a proper candidate for elimination. Despite his appearance of pastiness and ill-health, it might be fatal to underestimate the threat which he posed. He had outwitted me once, slipping through my guard to kill Winkler. Next time the target might be me.

I stood gazing at the tail of the train until it was consumed by the black maw of the tunnel. My next step must be to call Jope, to report my series of failures and obtain further orders. I wondered briefly if I should have phoned him immediately instead of trailing my man but I did not have much time for reflection. An angry voice bellowed along the plat-

form. The fat woman in the gay print dress was bearing down on me, her eyes red-rimmed with venom. I couldn't exactly blame her but this was no time for a hassle, with possible explanations to the subway police. I scuttled along to the next flight of stairs and headed back to the street. I put in my call from a booth in a long line at the rear of a drug store across the street from the Havana-Madrid.

Before the first burr of the phone had subsided, I heard the crisp starchy voice of Miss Harris, Jope's secretary.

"The Sunrise Clothing Company."

I had never met Miss Harris but she must have heard my voice hundreds of times, certainly enough for immediate recognition, but I had to go through the whole rigmarole of signs and countersigns before I was put through to Jope. The precaution was necessary, I imagine, but I always felt a bit foolish over it. Once, during a period of idleness, I'd checked to see if there really was a Sunrise Clothing Company. It was listed in the telephone book with an address in the middle of the garment district but the number listed there was not the one I had used. I had even paid a surreptitious visit to the building to make sure that the company was doing a legitimate business and that its president was named Jope. After that I had left well enough alone. I had a feeling that if Jope discovered I was sniffing around, he wouldn't be pleased, and that was putting it mildly. And Jope was one man whose enmity I could do without.

Even now I had a sensation of uneasiness as I heard Jope's dry voice. I had to admit that, as far as this assignment was concerned, I had not acquitted myself too well. Jope gave no indication of censure or surprise as I related the day's events, but then he never did. As I talked I could hear him fiddling with a radio.

Then I heard him say, "They broke this one fast."

He must have thrust the radio close to the phone because the metallic voice of a newscaster came over the wire in clear rasping tones: "Less than twenty minutes ago, a man was shot and killed as he sat in the lobby of the swank Havana-Madrid Hotel in midtown Manhattan. Police have temporarily identified him from the contents of his wallet as Professor Winkler of Point Sable Uni-

versity." A brief description of Winkler followed and then a promise of full news coverage of "the astonishingly bold crime."

Jope spoke softly. "That tears it. The news boys will be on to Mrs Winkler in no time flat. How much does she know?"

I chewed it over. "Not much I should think. Winkler was enjoying himself playing the cloak-and-dagger game. He went into the bedroom to get dressed and she followed him but I suspect he was pretty secretive."

"But she saw you. Will she be able to identify you?"

"She'd have to be blind not to. She admitted me to the house last night and hung about until her husband sent her scooting."

"Could she hear what you were talking about?"

"Possibly. But we were speaking Spanish. According to Winkler, his wife doesn't know the language."

Jope's sigh whispered over the wire, "All right. We won't try to stop her from talking. It's probably too late anyhow and any attempt to suppress her might make matters worse. So keep away from her. Don't go anywhere where she might spot you." He hesitated. "Right now you'd better go over to see Pinney and run through the shots he's got to see if you can make an I.D. on the killer."

Al Pinney lives in a fleabag on 42nd Street. The Amalia Hotel is the sort of dive that no one would ever dream of using for legitimate purposes. The cracked tiles of its miniature lobby are covered with a scuffed carpet. Even in the bright afternoon the grimy window lets in so little light that reading is discouraged and the naked twenty-five watt bulb dangling above the reception desk doesn't give much help.

The Amalia appears to be staffed solely by doddering old men but appearances can be deceptive. Si Bartlett, the bald desk clerk, is pushing eighty but, in his day he's been a judo expert used to train combat troops. Nick Lilley, who doubles as bellman and elevator operator isn't much younger. He resembles a scarecrow in his over-sized monkey suit but the flapping coat covers a blunt-nosed 32 that, according to rumor, never leaves his person. Nick is still an expert shot. Anyone pulling any rough stuff is in for a surprise.

Si Bartlett nodded grumpily as I moved past the desk

and walked into the elevator. In an era of self-service elevators, the Amalia sported an old-fashioned grill-work cage that clanked upward at a snail's pace, though I happened to know it had a hidden mechanism which, in an emergency, could make it shoot to the top floor with incredible speed.

Without turning Nick said sourly, "Cloak - and - dagger boy! Why don't you clear out of the game while you're young? If you don't you'll end up in a monkey suit like me."

I grinned. I couldn't count the number of times I'd heard the beef from Nick. The truth of the matter was that he'd practically got down on his knees to plead with Jope to keep him on in the service. Intrigue was in Nick's blood and, if he was bored with the Amalia, he preferred it a hundred-fold to a life of leisurely loafing in Florida.

The lower floors of the Amalia were run as a tenth-rate hotel, housing a few Broadway characters, down-and-out actors, deadbeats, winos and couples seeking a shoddy privacy for illicit love affairs. At first glance the top floor looked as ramshackle as the rest of the building. The same threadbare carpets lined the corridors. The paint on the doors was flaking and the tin numbers were rusted. You had to do a bit of checking before you realized that access to the floor was virtually impossible except by the elevator, that each door was reinforced by steel and each wall by concrete.

Al Pinney was waiting for me at the end of the hall. He was a man of medium height, almost bald and with a long bronzed face scoured by harsh lines. I couldn't guess his age but I knew he was tough and wiry, a good man to have on your side when the going was rough.

He led me into a room that was startling the first time it was seen. It was a huge place, made by ripping down the walls of four rooms. One end was completely decorated in bright red —a king-sized bed with a scarlet counterpane, chairs upholstered in red leather, a red carpet, even red curtains at the windows. There was no particular significance attached to the color. This was where Pinney lived and, as he happened to like red, there was no reason why he should not indulge his whim. The rest of the space was covered with a mass of paraphernalia: rank after rank

of gray filing cabinets, laboratory equipment, high frequency radios, transmitting sets, and cases crammed with technical books.

Among his other duties, Pinney was in charge of the photographic division of Triple V. During the days when Castro had been fighting in the mountains, a job had been wangled for Pinney with a national magazine to cover the story of the guerillas.

He had spent months in the mountain hideouts with the bearded warriors. He had pictures of nearly every man who had served under Castro as well as those of the strong-arm squad who had surrounded Batista in Havana. To these he had added photographs of the exiles who had fought at the Bay of Pigs and of the Cubans who had slipped into Florida at night to join the growing horde of ex-patriots in Miami and Ybor City. Most of the exiles were genuine but enough spies had been planted among them to make everyone suspect. All in all Triple V's file of Cuban activists was probably the most complete in the world.

While Pinney dragged out the heavy albums, I gave him a quick description of Winkler's assassin, hoping that it might ring a bell and save time. But Pinney shook his head. I imagine I'd been working over the files for half an hour before I struck pay dirt. The flattened face and bulbous eyes that stared back at me from the glossy print were unmistakably those of the man whom I had seen through the streaked window of the subway car. Pinney came to look over my shoulder and made a spinsterish clucking sound.

"Fernando Morales," he said softly, "I must be slipping. I didn't even know Fernando was in the country, to say nothing of New York."

He gave me a run-down on the man. Morales had changed his coats many times. Born in 1931, in Toledilla, Cuba, Fernando had first shown up in Havana as a pimp and later worked for the American gambling syndicate to which Batista had given sanctuary. He'd begun as a guide to lure tourists into the casinos but a flair for violence had resulted in his graduation to a bodyguard and collector for a character known as Crazy Joe Ballozzi. Shortly before Castro's men came storming into the city, Ballozzi had been gunned down, presuma-

bly by Morales, who had fled from Havana and joined up with the rebels. Morales' knowledge of the inner workings of the syndicate had served him in good stead. He had fingered at least a dozen of his former associates who were rounded up and shot. However, Fernando's penchant for blackmail had soon got him into trouble. He'd changed sides again and hijacked a fishing boat to bring him to the Florida coast. For a few days he'd been conspicuous among the evacueés and then he'd disappeared. There were rumors that he'd been fitted out with a concrete overcoat and dumped into Biscayne Bay but obviously they were not true.

"Which side's he on now?" I asked.

Pinney's shrug was elaborate. "With Fernando, who knows?"

I studied Pinney's hard lean face, wondering how much Jope had filled him in on the operation that had led to Winkler's death. If there was one man whom Jope trusted it was Pinney. But secrecy, even among fellow agents, is an unwritten law of Triple V. The fewer people who are in on a mission, the less chance there is of a leak.

I tried to keep my voice casual. "You wouldn't have a photo of a man named Hector Castro Melendez, would you?"

I saw surprise leap into Pinney's eyes and his mouth pucker into a whistle as he weighed the import of the question.

"Fidel's big brother?"

"So you do know about him?"

"What's to know? Until a few months ago the guy was a complete nonentity. There'd been just Fidel and little brother Raul. Then Hector starts popping up all over the place. He hasn't got a thing to say and he's alway shielded from photographers, but he's there just the same."

"How much do you know about Hector?"

"Precious little when you come to think of it. He's Fidel's half-brother by an earlier marriage. After his mother's death, Hector lived with her people in a sugar plantation in a tiny town called Toledilla." He stopped short, his eyes squinting in speculation. "Toledilla," he repeated. "That's where Fernando Morales was born. He'd know Hector."

I let the silence draw out. Morales would have known Winkler too. The reason why he had been chosen as the

assassin was obvious. But it didn't answer the main question in my mind: had the little professor been eliminated because he would have recognized the guest at the Havana-Madrid as Hector, or because he could have exposed him as a fake. It was even possible that Morales had gone to the hotel with orders to shoot Hector and that he had panicked at the unexpected sight of Winkler in the lobby. The slaying might have been a spur of the moment decision made by Morales himself without consultation with his superiors.

Pinney started to speak but his words were interrupted by the clangor of the red plastic telephone. Pinney scooped up the instrument, listened for a few moments and handed it to me.

Jope's voice over the wire was as dry as usual but all the same I sensed an undertone of excitement in it.

"Sam Conte's showed up in the Havana-Madrid. He's in apartment 1022 right now. Unless all signs fail that's where Hector's holed up. Three men have signed into that apartment. They claim to be Puerto Ricans but I'm betting they're Cubans and registered under phoney names. I'll stake my bottom dollar that one of those three is Hector."

I filled him in briefly on my identification of Fernando Morales. He grunted. "Morales can wait. If he's picked up too soon, it will tip off Castro's boys and might precipitate action. We want Hector alive and kicking."

"Do we dare let Conte take him out of the Havana-Madrid?"

"It's a chance we've got to take. The moment they realize we're closing in, Hector's a dead duck. As a matter of fact a gun-battle at the Havana-Madrid is probably just what Castro would like best. It would make a sensational setting. They could shoot Hector in the midst of the battle and we'd never be able to prove it wasn't one of our own who had gunned him."

"Maybe that's what Castro wants. But not Conte. After all, Conte's an American citizen with a pretty nasty record. He's under federal indictment right now. Would he voluntarily involve himself in a shooting fray in the heart of New York City?"

Jope clucked. "I think Conte's on the level, if you can call it that. At least he genuinely believes that he's a

partner in a crooked arms deal. In case things go wrong, I suspect Castro's boys are setting him up for a fall guy."

"Who have we got at the hotel now?"

"Mace and Ball. But you and Pinney had better hop over there fast. The Havana-Madrid has almost as many exits as Grand Central Station, and, if they take Hector out, I want him followed. Another thing, the Cubans probably spotted you earlier, while you were in the lobby with Winkler. So if they see you again, it doesn't matter too much. It may even help to take the heat off of Mace and Ball."

As I hung up it occurred to me that there was one too many sitting ducks and that that one was me.

Pinney's battered black Jaguar was at the curb outside the Amalia. He had added so many parts that it had the look of a mongrel. It also looked as though it might fall apart at any minute but, beneath its dented hood, was a souped-up engine that still purred like a kitten at a hundred miles per hour.

I reflected that, if the Cubans really wanted to spirit Hector away from the Havana-Madrid, it shouldn't be too hard. Myriad shops on the ground level had doorways leading onto the street, to say nothing of the subterranean caverns of the subway. But too many games at this stage might arouse Hector's suspicions and would certainly give Conte grounds for thought. If Jope was right, and he was seldom wrong, Conte would be played for a patsy right to the end. He would know nothing about the plans for the assassination. That would be left completely in the hands of Castro's own men, who were ostensibly acting as Hector's bodyguard.

In the devious intrigue so dear to Castro's heart, there would be other considerations. If Hector were killed too soon after his arrival, it would be difficult to explain how the CIA, Castro's favorite whipping boy, could have tumbled to the munitions plot so quickly. It would be better if Hector were paraded about a bit and put on public display. Even though no one in New York was likely to recognize him at present, after his death the picture would change. Impartial witnesses, ready to swear that Hector had left the hotel voluntarily, would help to bolster Castros' story. In Cuba, where the news media were control-

led, such details were of little importance but elsewhere in Latin America and among United States citizens quickly swayed to sympathy for a victim of the CIA, the frame-up would have to stand up to at least a superficial scrutiny.

If my reasoning was correct the elaborate facade of the main doorway was the most likely place of exit. Pinney parked the Jaguar half a block away and I sauntered toward the entry. Four marble steps led upward. I stopped on the second one and rested a hip on the stone balustrade. I went through a pantomime of glancing at my wristwatch and scrutinizing the crush of people on the sidewalk as though searching for someone. Then I sighed, eased my back against the wall and lit a cigarette. But at the same time I was doing a pretty good job of keeping the lobby in full view.

I had expected the police to be on the scene. After all, less than two hours had passed since Winkler's death. But apparently the management had brought enough pressure to bear so that, if there were police present, they were not obvious. The lobby hummed with its everyday activity.

I had a long wait in the punishing sun. I must have smoked the better part of a pack of cigarettes and my throat felt as though it had been rubbed with sandpaper. Waiting is the toughest part of any operator's job and, despite the countless hours I've spent at it, I've never been able to accept the boredom without an inner plaint. Some agents, like Pinney, claim to be able to shut off their minds, to become a pair of watching eyes and nothing more. But not me. The longer I wait, the more conscious I become of my aching feet, the sweat soaking through my shirt and the stupifying tedium that can dull the warning of danger.

Once I saw Ball pass through the lobby dressed as a bellman. Ball is the youngest agent in Triple V. He's twenty-six but he can pass for a high school senior when he has to. He's five foot four, slender, with crew-cut light brown hair and guileless blue eyes. No one would ever think of him as dangerous but Ball romped through Triple V's course in self-preservation and unarmed combat with flying colors. He can kill a man with a chopping blow of his hand or break his neck with a rigid forearm drive.

Ball disappeared from my view but ten minutes later he

showed up on the stairs two steps higher than myself. He didn't look at me but stared over my head at the crowd on the street. When he spoke his lips didn't move. The hoarse carrying whisper that seems strangely disembodied is familiar in any prison. It's a trick that is easy to learn.

"We didn't have time to bug the room but I got in to serve drinks. They're taking Hector to Catania or at least that's what Conte plans. Maybe when they're on the road Castro's boys will have second thoughts."

Catania. It was a natural. Conte's house in Catania was reputed to be a virtual fortress, surrounded by an electrified fence and guarded by fierce German police dogs. Ironically the house was known as Villa Serena and it was used for the most secret meetings of the top brass of Cosa Nostra.

I was doing some quick thinking. It didn't seem likely that Hector would be murdered in Catania because his death there would point toward the underworld rather than the CIA. More probably Conte had the wind up, believing that the Cubans in exile might attempt to kill or kidnap Hector. In that case Fidel's big brother would be relatively safe in Villa Serena. And the Cubans would probably play along. The longer Hector was kept under wraps by Conte, the more time they had to stage the perfect frame-up.

Ball's monotonous whisper started again. "Who do you think's up there with Hector? Manfredo Garcia. Sure he used a phony name on the hotel register, but it's Garcia right enough."

I gave him a startled glance but he was humming, balancing on the balls of his feet, looking out into space.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," he said, without turning in my direction. Then swinging around he reentered the lobby.

Manfredo Garcia! The name sent tingling fingers along my spine, partly of apprehension, partly of sheer hate. Garcia was a cousin of Castro's and his favorite hatchetman, a specialist in the art of torture. I'd never met him personally but he'd been responsible for the death of one of my friends. I'd studied his photo until the bland face with the slightly slanted eyes and high cheek bones that gave his features an Oriental cast, were graven in my mind. I had no delusions about the man's cleverness or of his dangerous psychotic drives but all the

same I looked forward to tangling with him. If we ever met face to face, I knew one of us must die.

There was a stir within the lobby. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the elevators. Two stout, well-dressed, middle-aged couples were waiting for the car. But, as the elevator door slid open, six men pushed their way out, shoving the couples back. One of the middle-aged men seemed to be stammering an indignant protest. I had to smother the instinct to call out a warning. Neither Castro's goon squads or Conte's hoods would hesitate to chop down any person who stood in their way. A goon stepped close to the protesting man and swept him back with a straight arm across the chest. The gesture appeared innocent enough but I sensed the bone-crushing force of the blow. The victim's face blanched. He stumbled back and collapsed in a chair, gasping for breath.

The six men fanned out in a vee formation and came to a halt. Awareness of some unusual event seemed to flash through the lobby, for almost every head was turned toward the gaping door of the cage. Three men remained inside. Sam Conte emerged next. The last two came out together. Instantly I recognized the chunky body and suave face of Manfredo Garcia. His hand was resting deferentially on the arm of his taller, slender companion. The man who was guarded with such a pretence of solicitousness could only be Hector Castro Melendez, or a ringer sent to die in his place.

Hector looked around him, his thick-lensed glasses making his countenance owlish. His sparse hair was the color of dried corn stalks and his pallid face was that of a gone-to-seed intellectual.

Purposely or not Hector was making a production of his progress across the lobby. He was stumbling a little as though he had imbibed too heavily, and Garcia was guiding him. Probably none among the scores of people watching had the faintest idea of his identity. But if he were to be killed and his portrait was to adorn the front pages of the papers, there would be many among them who would come forward to swear that he had been tenderly guarded and that he had made no effort to escape.

I didn't wait to see any more. I was walking rapidly along the crowded street to the spot where Al Pinney's Jaguar was parked, its mo-

tor humming. I slid in beside him. From where we sat we caught a glimpse of a huge chauffeur-driven Cadillac easing under the portico of the Havana-Madrid. Hector, with Garcia still at his side, descended the stairs, holding himself with an awkward stiffness.

There were two other cars for the remaining members of the entourage. As the Cadillac swung into the traffic, one of them took the lead and the other fell in behind, sandwiching the big black car between them.

Pinney grunted and joined the parade. I looked around for Ball and Mace. Like ourselves they were probably picking up the trail but cleverly enough so that I couldn't spot them. Pinney's hand was rigid on the wheel, but for the time being, he had nothing to worry about. The cavalcade moved slowly, almost sedately. The cars ahead did not put on any speed until they had left the congestion of mid-Manhattan behind and were rolling along the West Side Highway. Even then the three cars huddled together, holding a steady pace. At the toll booths along the Henry Hudson Parkway, they remained at the far left, keeping in a single lane, with the Cadillac always hemmed in between the two other cars.

The steady monotonous whir of the wheels lulled me into carelessness and I lost track of the time. I was caught by surprise when Pinney braked abruptly. Ahead of us the three cars had veered to the far right lane and were waiting for a hole in the oncoming traffic to jostle onto a narrow blacktop.

Pinney swore under his breath. "They're headed for Catania all right. But why pick the old mountain road when they can get within twelve miles of Conte's house on the highway?" And then, answering his own question, he added, "Either they've spotted us, or are testing to see if anyone's on their tail."

We had slowed down to a crawl. Cars blasted past us. Then one matched our own pace. Mace was at the wheel. Ball's boyish face appeared at the window. Pinney bellowed a few words and signalled them on. They were to take the slightly longer but much speedier route along the highway to Catania and wait for us there.

By the time we entered the blacktop, the cavalacade was at least a mile ahead but keeping track of it presented no difficulties. Every now and then the cars would come

into view in a clearing or on a high rise. But if we could see them, they could see us too. It seemed unlikely they were not suspicious of the car on their heels. Pinney was alert for a trick, suspecting that the cars might conceal themselves in the thick foliage by the roadside and wait for us to ride into an ambush. Gradually he dropped farther back. After all Catania was their only likely destination.

The blacktop was occasionally crisscrossed by dirt roads. At first farmhouses dotted the fields and now and then we passed an abandoned filling station. But there were few signs of habitation. Pinney relaxed a bit. He lit a cigar and said, "Mace and Ball should beat us to Catania by an hour or two and have the place staked out.

I shrugged. Our job was to abduct Hector from the men whom he believed to be his friends. I weighed the chances of taking him alive on the highway against those of kidnapping him from Conte's home in Catania. Neither one looked hopeful. The only thing to do was tag along and play it by ear. Maybe luck would play into our hands and offer us a chance to snatch him when he was slightly guarded.

I had a queasy feeling that we were not alone on the winding blacktop, that another car was lurking at our back. At every elevation I scanned the road behind us. Once a pick-up truck reeled out of a side-road and rattled toward the highway. Another time a couple of girls passed us in a dusty Ford and waved gaily. Otherwise the mountainous countryside was almost eerily devoid of life.

Just as dusk was beginning to fall, the cavalcade up ahead switched off the blacktop and onto a dirt road that spiralled back to the east.

Pinney made a low humming sound in his throat. "That doesn't lead to Catania. What are they up to?"

"A short cut?"

"Not likely."

"Maybe we've been wrong all the time. Maybe they're not headed for Villa Serena. They'd know that's what we expect, so they could have another house tucked away somewhere in the mountains."

"Anything is possible. But my bet is we're walking into a trap."

We'd reached the mouth of the dirt road. Pinney nosed gingerly into it. The surface was surprisingly smooth with

a rock face at one side and a sharp dip into a stone-encrusted valley on the other. Here and there, where the road widened, clusters of heavy brush, briers and waist-high grass lined the verges.

Pinney crawled on at a snail's pace until the thrum of the motors ahead was scarcely audible in the mountain stillness. Night was coming in quickly, dropping around us like a soft blanket. The road bulged outward to avoid an outcropping of rock. As we rounded the curve we saw a car partially blocking our passage. It was a heavy brown Buick with torn upholstery, a cracked rear window and dents in its fenders. The hood was open and two youngsters were examining the engine.

We slowed down. One of the youths looked up, grinned and walked directly into the path of our car. Pinney drew up so sharply that he nearly stalled.

The kid certainly didn't appear menacing. He was eighteen or so, with an open freckled face and reddish hair in a crew cut. He wore a blue work-shirt and tight-fitting jeans that made his legs look pencil-thin. His grin grew broader. "How about lending us a hand? Like maybe a push."

He was within a foot of Pinney's window when a flash of light caught the burnished steel wrench in his hand. I called out sharply but Pinney was even quicker than I to spot the danger. The wrench swept up and sideways to angle through the open window and smash into Pinney's face. But the blow never landed. Pinney depressed the lock on his door and kicked it open. The cutting metallic edge scraped across the boy's arm with Pinney's full weight behind it. The boy was knocked off balance and sent spinning backward to sprawl on the earth. He screamed and his wrench bounced against a rock.

I caught a blur of movement from the youth beside the Buick. He had leapt forward and was standing spraddle-legged in the roadway, the ugly snub nose of an automatic jutting from his hand. I had just time to flatten myself against the back of the seat before I heard the splat of the gun. The bullet whipped by like an angry hornet, starred the unbreakable glass of the windshield and ricocheted, burying itself in the leather upholstery.

The Jag was already lurching forward. We passed with-

in inches of the youth who had shot at us. He was older than the other. He had a dark face with olive skin, obsidian eyes, craggy features, a broad flat nose and curling black sideburns.

The fallen boy couldn't have been badly hurt. Already he was on his feet, scuttling toward the Buick. The dark youth huddled behind the wheel. The motor blazed into life, then faded to a purr as the car shot forward with a flowing motion that suggested the springing litheness of some wild predatory animal.

The Jaguar bent around a curve, branches lashing at its side. It slued, the tires screaming along the surface of dirt and stone. Pinney rose half out of his seat, bracing himself to fight the wheel that threatened to spin from his hand. He hit a soft spot and the car tilted at a precarious angle before the tires found traction which pulled us upright again.

Pinney pressed the accelerator flat on the floorboards. His eyes flicked back and forth from the road ahead to the rearview mirror. The Buick was on our tail in a matter of seconds. Its siren, like that of a police car, split the silence with a banshee wail.

Despite the souped-up engine under our hood, the Buick was cutting down the distance between us, creeping closer inch by inch. The gray dusk had changed in minutes to total darkness and a Scotch mist added to the danger of the soft road.

The Buick was only half a length behind, sticking there as though glued to our tail. Pinney was holding the center of the road, weaving to prevent the youngsters from edging up beside him. I was crouching low, when still another bullet nicked the window at my right and whistled off into the night.

Pinney was boxed in. If he slowed down the Buick would come slamming into our rear and both cars would be wrecked. His face was taut. He said, "The kid's crazy. He'll kill us all."

I glanced through the cracked window. There was not a house in sight. Pinney took the next curve wide and, just as he had hoped, the Buick tried to nose in ahead of us. Pinney whipped his car back to the center, hoping to catch the Buick off guard and lash it with his fender. But the driver was an expert at the game. He pulled back, just enough for the fender to miss with a half inch to spare.

Pinney grunted. "I've one last trick up my sleeve. God help us if it doesn't work."

The roadway slanted off to the right. Beyond was a gully studded with pine trees. The Buick was trying to crowd us to the left where there was a sheer stone cliff rising for fifty feet. Pinney kept to the middle of the road, then eased to the left, as though he were exhausted and ready to give up.

The Buick edged up beside us. The dark face of the driver was a gray mask as he stared in our direction. We were at too close quarters for any fancy shooting. If either car spun out of control the other could not avoid crashing with it.

Pinney put on an unexpected burst of speed. Momentarily the Buick fell behind; then it came inching up again until we were racing side by side, our hoods even with only a foot between. I could see the dark youth's rigid silhouette against the glimmer of his dashboard lights. Once he leaned toward us, shouting a fierce command, but the words were swallowed in the rush of the wind.

The cars were dangerously close together, jolting along the pitted roadway. A short way ahead, the road widened. Pinney's face was slit by a grimace that twisted his lips back over his teeth.

He yelled, "This is it. Hold tight."

My eyes darted to the speedometer. The red arrow pointed at eighty.

At the cleared space, the Buick eased off to the right. Pinney moved with it, closing the gap between the cars, studying the angles as though he were making a shot at pool. Then his hands clamped over the wheel in a vise-like grip. He grasped the wheel hard with both hands and spun it to the right in a single fierce relentless motion.

The two cars came together with a nerve-shattering impact, the Jaguar slapping the full length of the Buick. Metal ground against metal and tires gave a tortured scream. The cars clung to each other for a dozen yards as though locked in a death grip. Then with a shriek of ripping steel they broke apart. The Buick shuddered and spun around crazily. Its headlights cut a dancing yellow swathe along a stand of spruce. Then it was off the road, teetering on the brink of the deep gully. The side wheels rose high and, with a crash of steel and glass, the Buick rolled over the edge

and disappeared.

Pinney was still fighting for control of our car, his knuckles like chalk where his hands clamped the wheel. Loose earth and pebbles gritted beneath our tires and pelted the underside of the Jag. The rear wheels swung perilously close to the stone facing but, within seconds, he was back in the middle of the road.

On top of a rise we lurched to a stop. Pinney used the back of his sleeve to wipe away the sweat that had sprouted on his forehead. The exhalation of his breath rasped loud in the car.

"Do we go back?" I asked, but I knew the answer before I finished speaking.

"Not likely. If they're alive and conscious, they'll pick us off before we get to them. If they're dead, we're of no help."

He was right, of course, but I had a moment of rebellion as an image of the younger boy's freckled face came to mind. Then I remembered the wrench. The rules of the game were made: no quarter on either side. I looked back toward the wreck, half-expecting to see the spreading glow of fire and hear the crackle of flames. But there were only darkness and the whirring sounds of the night.

Pinney growled, "Where the hell are we and what's happened to Conte and his crowd?"

As though in answer, from over a mountain crest miles away, three pairs of headlights speared the dark sky.

"They must have doubled back to the blacktop and then found a road in the opposite direction."

"Right. And it won't be any easy job chasing them through this maze at night."

I offered to take the wheel but Pinney shook his head without speaking. I made no further protest. I could guess what he was feeling. The bleak numbness, the writhing undirected anger that comes as the aftermath of taking life. For awhile, he'd need the tension of driving. We passed the spot where the Buick had crashed downward. Still there was not a sound. Pinney's eyes did not flick sideways for an instant.

Long before we caught up with the cavalcade the mist had turned into a swirling storm. We watched the crawling headlights up ahead but there were no more tricks. Had Conte or Garcia arranged the ambush for us? Or had the two of them worked in collusion? If so it seemed strange that they had not

bothered to check the success of their plan. Maybe they felt confident that the killers had completed their job and that the lights at their back were those of the Buick.

To date I'd had little time for anger. The whole affair had been so staged and theatrical that it was stripped of a sense of reality. Even Winkler's death had failed to touch me much. I'd been too busy, too tense with the things I had to do, to give much thought to the roly-poly professor. But the ambush on the road was something else again. We had been forced to kill or be killed in a senseless blood-letting, the results of which the instigators had been too indifferent to check.

A picture of Hector Castro Melendez came to me; the weak, puzzled, yet amiable face. Even in my momentary glimpse of him, I had sensed an inherent decency that supported Winkler's judgment that he was a naive pawn under his brother's domination. Unless I misjudged him, he would be a man to whom family loyalty and Latin pride would be all-important.

My task was to keep this man alive and, as we bumped and jostled along the rain-swept road, I found that I was no longer fulfilling a routine assignment. Once, long ago, I had met Fidel Castro. I remembered the cruel mask of his bearded face, his sly leering eyes, his habit of bending close over those with whom he talked, so that he sprayed their faces with his spittle. There was a dynamic animalism about the man, a swaggering cruelty that had made him a leader in the jungle battles. I thought of the bearded youthful idealists who had been his followers. What had happened to them? Either they had been corrupted by their leader or repaid for their loyalty by the firing squad or prison cells. Soon it would be Hector's turn to die. Unless we could stop it.

Conte was in one of the cars ahead. But the more I thought of him, the more I doubted that he knew of the murder trap left on the road. Not that I put murder past him. Conte would kill in the heat of blood or to protect his investments. But essentially he was a business man. Wanton murder would jeopardize his financial interests. The proposed deal in weapons might not be strictly legal but he would plan to consummate the sale in Mexico where any violation of international law would be hard to prosecute.

If Conte could be reached

and persuaded he was being double-crossed, would he switch sides? I doubted it. He'd be more likely to bow out or force a show-down with Garcia. Either way he might precipitate the very situation which we sought to avoid. Once the elaborate plot fell through and Garcia was in danger of being exposed, Hector's expendability would be immediate. Even if Hector was killed behind the electrified wire fence of Villa Serena, there were many people who would believe him to be the victim of the "Yanqui Imperialists."

We saw the lights of Villa Serena at about ten o'clock that night. The storm had abated and left the sky a crisp black, dotted with finely delineated stars. The house was made mostly of stone and wedged into the mountain side. Its windows were ablaze with yellow light. The cavalcade dipped downward toward the wide barred gate.

Pinney dowsed the Jaguar's headlights and we rolled to a stop on a high ridge. We watched while an armed guard came from a sentry box to inspect the cars. Then the gate swung open. The cavalcade spiralled along a curved drive until it reached the portico. There was a flurry of movement as the passengers got out, stretched, formed into little groups and entered the house. Their voices, slurred with distance, drifted up to us.

Once more we settled down to waiting. From below echoed the sounds of drinking, laughter, loud talk and occasional snatches of song—all indications of an uninhibited celebration. Conte would be throwing the party in good faith, trying to induce a mellow mood in Hector for the bargaining he believed was to come. I felt a nervous stirring within me. Both Conte and Garcia must know that we were keeping them under observation. Probably Conte would think we were Cubans in exile and that wouldn't bother him much. But Garcia would have a better idea of our true identity. Even now his goons might be crawling up on us to riddle the car with shots.

Pinney and I moved from the Jaguar to the protection of a heavy thicket and lay side by side in the shadows, our guns ready. By an hour after midnight, the sounds from below were subdued. From time to time, people appeared on the porch or wandered out onto the lawn. Through my field glasses I could make out Garcia's burly form and several times I saw

Conte. Once Hector's tall lean silhouette was visible at a window. He was talking with a girl. Her back was toward me and I could see only her trim figure clothed in an evening gown of gold lamé, and her glistening black hair. Even so she gave an impression of animation and of great beauty. More than that, there was something vaguely familiar about her. I shrugged off the idea. It was only natural that drink should not be the only ingredient employed by Conte to soften up Hector.

More lights blazed in the upstairs rooms; then one by one they were extinguished. Only muted sounds came from the villa. As the house lights glimmered, flood lights pierced the darkness, their yellow glow penetrating the lawns and the wooded area at the rear. There was a hum and sputter as electricity poured through the corded wire of the fence.

Until now only the guard at the gate had been in evidence but other men showed up at their posts. The swift shadowy movements of dogs swept across the lawn.

I started to whisper to Pinney but his fingers pressed painfully on my arm. From somewhere along the spur came the faintest of sounds: the displacement of a pebble, the scarcely audible crunch of a boot on loose soil. Someone was out there, hidden by the darkness, moving cautiously toward us.

I lay flat on my stomach, uncatching the safety of my revolver and flexing my fingers. Pinney rolled away from me in a silent fluid movement which brought him to his feet in a crouch. I neither saw nor heard him once he had angled away into the shadows.

Moments passed in silence, broken only by the whir of insects and the whining drove of a radio buried deep within the stone house. Then there was the crackle of a footstep, followed almost immediately by the sounds of scuffling, a dull thud and the gasp of a man whose breath has been knocked out of him.

I rose slowly. I was betting on Pinney but all the same I was coppering my bets. I stuck to the shadows, my gun ready, edging toward the spot where we'd left the car. It wasn't long before I spotted two figures, one prone on the grass, the other crouching over him.

The kneeling man was Pinney. In spite of my care, he must have heard me. He whispered, "Mike. Come here."

I hurried across the grass.

He looked up, his face a white blob, his eyes catching the glitter of the stars.

I asked, "Who is he?"

"Mace. The damn fool! Pussyfooting around here. I might have killed him." He sounded genuinely shaken.

"Is he hurt bad?"

"I don't think so. I pulled my punch at the last moment."

Mace's head flopped to one side. His eyes blinked open and his arms spread. He tried to speak but his voice was a hoarse meaningless rasp.

Pinney had gone to the car and had come back with brandy. He pressed the flask to Mace's lips. Mace sputtered and gagged but finally swallowed. With his relief, Pinney's anger rose. He was swearing a blue streak.

Mace managed a feeble grin. He was a tall reedy young man, with wavy chestnut hair and the startling good looks of a matinee idol. He was a year older than Ball but had been in the service of Triple V for only a few months.

Pinney let out a final blast of invective and retreated.

I said, "Why'd you come here, Mace? You were crazy to sneak up on Pinney."

Mace rubbed his throat ruefully. "You can say that again. But Ball and I talked things over and decided you'd better be warned in case you've got any idea of cracking into the villa tonight. You wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance. We got here while there was still daylight and had plenty of opportunity to study the set-up. The house is practically an arsenal. Besides the dogs and the live wire, they've got at least two machine guns, one of them mounted on the roof of the garage. My guess is that they know you're here and have a reception party waiting."

"Do they know about you and Ball?"

"I don't think they've cottoned to us yet. We've dug in on a slope to the north."

"If we don't get through to Hector tonight, it may be too late."

"Sure. But if you try and fail, Hector's had it. Once the bullets start flying, Hector's going to pick up one of them."

He was right. Garcia and his crowd didn't dare take any risk that Hector should talk to any American in a position of authority. No matter how thoroughly he had been indoctrinated, there was always a chance that he could be persuaded to change sides.

A few minutes later Mace slipped away into the shadowed darkness but before he

left he gave me one more piece of important information. He'd been in touch with Jope and learned that there was a Triple V representative in Catania. He didn't know the name but contact could be established in the diner in the town's central square .

I worked my way back to Pinney. He lay still, a rifle beside him. He seemed not to breathe but I knew that he was awake and simply didn't want to talk. I stretched out beside him and stared at the house through the field glasses. A police dog came into my sights. He lifted his finely shaped head. His ears pricked and his tongue curled as though he sensed that he was being watched.

Pinney spoke in an undertone. "Why don't you grab yourself some kip, Mike? You've been on the job ten hours longer than I. If there's anything I can't handle, I'll wake you quick."

I mumbled, "Thanks, Al." There was nothing I wanted more than to flake out. My body relaxed and I could feel sleep creeping in on me, fogging my thoughts, covering me as though with a fuzzy white blanket.

I was awakened by the light steady pressure of fingers on my wrist. It seemed to me that only minutes had passed but I had slept close to two hours. As I opened my eyes, Pinney's long face loomed above me. With a flick of his hand he motioned toward the Villa Serena.

The gray stones of the sprawling building behind the wire fence had the unsubtantial look of cardboard. A floodlight flicked off and then another. A guard whistled lightly and the two dogs galloped up to him. He slipped leashes on them and slid his hand across their backs. Another guard emerged from a pocket of blackness cast by the spreading boughs of a spruce. They seemed to be talking but no words drifted up to us. One of them yawned elaborately, then together they led the dogs away. The remaining floodlights were dowsed and it was as though a black curtain had fallen over the grounds.

Gradually, as our eyes became accustomed to the darkness, we could make out forms again. The stars sent a lambent sheen across the lawn. Nothing stirred. No dogs. No guards. No surreptitious movements in the shadows.

Pinney spat. "They're sending us a gilt-edge invitation to come down there and get Hector."

I remembered Mace's warn-

ing. I hadn't mentioned it to Pinney and I didn't want to now. Instead I asked, "Do we accept?"

He said derisively, "Walk into my parlor! Not likely. I prefer to choose my own time."

The way he said it made me feel better. I looked beyond the house to the craggy mountain ridges. Above the monolithic hills, streaks of pale light were turning the deep purple sky to lavender. Lying here on the matted grass, I had a sense of ease, almost of exhiliration. In the unearthly silence, no one could get within half a mile of us without our knowledge. Even the scurrying of a rabbit on the pathway set up an audible rustling.

I began to talk, keeping my voice low, repeating what Mace had told me during the night. Somewhere in the little town of Catania, five miles to the north, there was a friend upon whom we could depend. But what good was an extra man? An army would have to lay siege to the villa to bull their way through the live wire of the fence and past the machine guns.

When I was finished Pinney said, "Let's get into Catania and see what we can learn." He rose, purposely exposing himself to the view of any watcher in the stone house, yet trying not to be too obvious about it. As long as they believed us to be camped out here, they were less likely to be suspicious of any other move we might make. We heated up coffee and each of us gulped a scalding cupful before setting out. Behind the stone spur where we were was a precipitous slope crusted with rocks and shale. Once we had descended this, there would still be three miles of mountainous country to traverse before we could reach the highway. But this was the only course open to us unless we wished to pass close to the villa.

The going was rough with loose rocks under our feet and jutting ridges of stone with cutting edges, but it felt good to be on the move. Despite the early hour an occasional car whizzed by on the highway. We kept to cover as much as possible. A hundred yards or so from the road, the land leveled off and was overgrown with trees, brush and briers. A path meandered along the edge of a dried up brook and we followed it, taking our time, knowing that the little town up ahead would still be sleeping when we arrived there.

Catania had something of

the look of a slow-moving Southern town. It centered about a square, the grass of which was brown with the summer drought. The near side of the square was under the domination of a building that appeared to be a medieval castle but which served as a county courthouse. Spreading out on either side was a street of huge old houses, remnants of past grandeur, complete with high gates, wrought-iron balconies, cupolas and gingerbread fretwork.

We strolled along curved paths of cracked cement until we came to the northern end. Here the road led into the highway and there was a filling station and a cluster of shops. The diner was among them. It was shaped like an oversized railroad car. Above it, printed in bright red letters against a white background, was a sign that read: ROSA'S HOME DINER—OUR SPECIALITIES: RAVIOLI, SPAGHETTI, LASAGNA. The diner was a spotless white, with red trim and flower-boxes at each window.

Pinney looked sourly at the scarlet geraniums and bright petunias before slumping down on a bench on the opposite sidewalk. He said, "For God's sake, what kind of a set-up has Jope fixed for us this time?"

I didn't answer. I was watching the diner. The doors weren't open yet but there was a flurry of motion from inside. A diesel-engined truck pulled up in front of us. The driver rolled out of his cab and made a bee-line for the diner. His knuckles beat a tattoo on the glass panel. Almost instantly the door was opened.

The driver said, "Hi, Rosie," and pushed his way inside. Momentarily a woman was framed in the doorway, a plump motherly woman with upswept white hair, flushed cheeks and dark laughing eyes. Her starched uniform was the color of wild roses.

We remained outside for another five minutes or so. When we went in, Rosa was setting a heaping plate of flapjacks, complete with melted butter and maple syrup, in front of the truck driver. He dug in but lifted his eyes to glare suspiciously at us. It made me realize how we must look. After the long drive, the night on the mountain side and the hike to town, our clothes were rumpled and crusted with dirt. We each needed a shave and Pinney's eyes were bloodshot. We chose stools at the far end of the counter and ordered

ham and eggs, toast and coffee.

The truck driver gulped his flapjacks and ambled toward us, looking us over.

"You fellows ain't from around here, are you?"

Pinney's response was dangerously mild and deliberately hangdog. "Just passing through."

"Yeah. I didn't notice no car."

Rosa broke in. "Leave 'em alone, Larry."

"Well, I don't like it. These guys look like they ain't got nothing but their hands, in their pockets. I don't like to see nobody diddlin' you out of the price of a meal."

Rosa's voice was calm but there was an edge of command beneath it. "Don't worry. There's nothing I can't handle."

Larry wasn't satisfied. He withdrew with reluctance but he looked happier as he passed a couple other truck drivers on his way out.

Rosa slid hot plates in front of us and, when we'd been served, made out the chits. She checked off the items with three neat little Vs in a row. She was our contact all right. I rested my hand on the counter, the fingers spread in the approved countersign.

By now the diner was filling up. A younger woman, in an identical rose-colored uniform, was helping serve. Rosa slid us re-fills of coffee and gave us a big smile but it was the better part of half an hour before she spoke to us again.

She said, "The washrooms are out in back. Go on past them to the house. The side door will be unlocked. I'll come as soon as I can."

We waited for a few more minutes and sauntered to the rear. The cottage, like the diner, was painted white and bedecked with gay window-boxes. The room that we entered had pink chintz curtains and chairs covered with red plush.

Pinney dropped into a chair and struck his forehead with the flat of his hand. "My God! A woman operator yet! At least we might have drawn one that was young and sexy instead of Mamma Mia." But he was grinning and I knew that he, like myself, had been impressed with Rosa's efficiency.

She came bustling in, the rustle of her starched skirt making more noise than the slither of her footsteps. Jope had filled her in with the essentials of the story, so she wasted no time in asking questions. She said, "I understand you want to get into

Sam Conte's place. Well, that should be easy as apple pie."

Pinney grunted and gave her a baleful look. "Sure. Electric wires. Guards with machine guns. Dogs on the prowl. What could be simpler?"

Rosa's laugh showed white teeth too even to be real. "You forget you've got me to take you in."

"What have you got? A secret tunnel?"

Rosa gave him an arch glance. "Sam always spreads the welcome mat out to me. He has plenty of fast-stepping women up there but not one of 'em can cook. Sam doesn't spend much of his time in Catania but, while he's here, I do the catering. What's easier than to take you in with me?"

Pinney looked at her skeptically. "What do we do? Ride along with you in the front seat? They know us and expect us. The villa is practically in a stage of siege."

"I've a small panel truck. I don't think they'll search it. If they do you'll be covered up."

"Do you usually drive the truck, Rosa?"

"No. My grandson does. But I do often enough so they won't be suspicious. Besides all the guards know me. They're mostly local boys."

Rosa entertained us in the kitchen while she worked. Although it must have occurred to her that the food which she was preparing was unlikely to be eaten, she cooked with meticulous care. Soon the kitchen was redolent with the tangy odors of garlic, oregano, roasting meat, Mozzarella cheese and olive oil. Pinney and I sipped glasses of blood-red Chianti and listened to her chatter as she moved back and forth from table to stove.

Rosa didn't look capable of hate but there was one man in the world whom she detested and from whom she intended to exact vengeance. That man was Sam Conte. Her story was simple. Her husband had died thirty years earlier, leaving her with a son and daughter to raise. She had started the diner and done all right but she blamed herself that she had been too busy to worry about her son. Danny had been content to help her about the place until he was sixteen. Then Sam Conte had taken an interest in him. Suddenly Danny had more money in his pockets then he'd ever dreamed of. Rosa had tried to find out its source but Danny was elusive, then abusive, telling her

to mind her own business.

It wasn't long afterward that Danny had been shot to death in a running gun battle as he crossed the state line in a stolen car. Rosa learned that Sam Conte had headed the operation. From that day on, she had hated him and planned his downfall. She had gone to the FBI but she had no proof and they could not help her. Eventually she had been steered into Triple V. Several times information which she had gleaned at Villa Serena had helped to thwart international deliveries of narcotics. But Sam Conte had remained unscathed. Rosa swore that she would never rest while he walked about free.

The panel truck was ready to set out at noon. Pinney and I had rigged out a crude platform of orange crates with a tarpaulin spread over it. Under casual examination this might pass for a contraption to keep the chafing dishes in place. There was room for both of us beneath the tarp but, if suspicions were aroused, we'd be caught like fish in a net.

An hour or so before we were ready to set out, Ball and Mace arrived on the scene. Both Pinney and I had tried to warn Rosa of her danger if she drove the truck. She risked being caught in the cross-fire of a gun battle. At the very least, Sam Conte would know that she had betrayed him. Ball did not look too much unlike her grandson. With luck he'd be able to get the truck past the gate.

Rosa shrugged and spread her hands. With her at the wheel, there'd be no suspicion; without her, we'd be shot down before we could swing into action. The trouble was she was right and we all knew it, so our protests were pretty half-hearted. The next problem was whether to try to squeeze Ball in with us. He might endanger our cover. On the other hand, there were no less than fifteen men in the house. With the odds stacked so heavily against us, we could use Ball. So, in the end, it was decided he should go. Mace meanwhile would keep the villa under observation with field glasses and report to Jope on whatever happened.

The inside of the panel truck was hotter and more stuffy than I had expected. Along the highway the passage was smooth but when we hit the dirt road, I had to brace myself against the sides not to roll free. My back kept hitting the floor

with a cracking force that sent pain shooting along my spine. From their muffled curses, I judged Pinney and Ball were having the same trouble.

The truck jolted to a halt and I knew we must be at the gate. Rosa's voice, muted to a tinkle, drifted into us. Moments later the panel door swung open. I braced myself to leap up and my fingers tightened on my gun. I peeped around the tarp. Rosa was at the door. Only then did it occur to me that she might betray us. Her voice was clear now. She was speaking to the guards in Italian and offering them home-made doughnuts. They accepted with laughter and a ribald joke.

Rosa didn't bolt the panel. A streamer of light came in as we crawled past the gate and swept along the curved driveway. Rosa drove to the rear of the house, then backed up against the side of a garage.

A woman came out from the house to greet her. Their chattering voices diminished as they moved away. I was the first to rise. The door of the truck faced the blank wall of the garage with only a few feet to spare. The truck's body would shield us from the view of anyone in the house. Ball rolled free and came up behind me. I turned to signal him that the coast was clear and, when I turned back again, a man was edging along the rear of the truck. I don't know where he came from or which of us was the more surprised. He stood gaping up at me, his mouth slack. He stook a step backward and the muscles of his throat tensed for a shout. I jumped and, even as I fell, I brought the muzzle of the gun down with terrific force. All my weight was behind the blow that landed on the top of his skull. His scream was still-born. He went down as though pole-axed and lay spread-eagled on the ground.

Rosa had told us there was a way into the house through the garage. I tiptoed to the wide wing door. Three cars were parked there. The hood of the black Cadillac was up and a man bent over the engine. I maneuvred in back of him, knowing that he had to be taken without a sound. I edged toward him and the heel of my hand lashed out in a karate stroke. But the unexpected hunch of his shoulder made the blow land too high. My hand slapped against his skull. He reeled away, still crouching. I went in after him and saw the gun already in his hand. There

was no time for fancy play. I lunged forward and my fist thudded into his stomach. He started to fold and the gun dropped from his loose fingers, landing on my shoe and clattering as it skidded along the cement floor. I stepped in close and gave him three more battering blows. He cart-wheeled into the car and pitched downward like a drunken sailor. His head struck the bumper with a crunching metallic sound. I thought he'd be out for a long time but I didn't dare take any chances. I slipped a gag over his mouth and bound his wrists behind him with thin wire. I didn't look around until I had finished. Pinney and Ball were guarding the garage door, their guns ready. I looked past them to the lawn, half expecting a rush of feet or the blast of guns but apparently the fray had attracted no attention.

I led the way to the side of the garage and up the three steps to the kitchen of the split-level house. I went through the door fast with a crouched zigzagging motion, but I needn't have worried. Rosa had the situation well in hand. She was talking in Italian to the only other person in the room. This was a dark, dumpy woman, whose molasses eyes skittered from one to another of us. Her lips quivered and the beads of her rosary chattered as she ran her fingers over them.

Rosa spoke gently. "I have told Prudencia she has nothing to fear from you."

Pinney snapped, "Not unless she tries to raise an alarm."

Rosa's smile was calm. "Prudencia will not do that but she wishes to be locked in the pantry lest they think she betrayed them."

The dark woman was nodding excitedly.

I said, "First she must tell us where to find Hector."

"I have already asked her. She doesn't know. She barely saw the men who arrived last night, and doesn't know to whom the various guestrooms were assigned."

"She could be lying."

"No. Prudencia would not lie to me. She is of the family." Rosa spoke with a conviction that denied argument.

"Ask her if there is any room that is like a prison, where a man could be confined against his will or be easily guarded."

Rosa spoke in staccato Italian, using many gestures. Prudencia's frown of perplexity changed to a beam of pleasure. Yes, there was such a place overlooking a cliff.

From the windows there was a drop of thirty feet onto jagged stone. The suite had only one door leading to the corridor and that could be bolted from the outside. Prudencia pointed out the rooms from a kitchen window. The only access was up a flight of stairs and along a long hallway.

As I started out, Pinney took a step after me but I checked him. There was no way of knowing how many men guarded the hall above but a lone invader might have the advantage of surprise. Besides I needed Pinney and Ball to prevent an attack from the rear and to clear a path for my retreat.

I went up the stairs at a normal pace, keeping my head bowed so that anyone stationed above could not see my face. I heard the scrape of a chair in the corridor and had to fight against the instinct to run and weave. I climbed on up, while the walls seemed to close in on me and make me a perfect target. As my eyes drew level with the top of the stairs, I saw a man seated there. His straight-back chair was tilted against the wall and he was studying a comicbook.

Without lifting his eyes, he said, "Hi there, George! I could do with a beer. Hey—"

In the last startled word was the awareness of his danger. My hands gripped the railing and I volted up the last few steps in a single leap. I heard the smack of the chair's legs against the flooring and had a blurred glimpse of the guard reaching for his gun. My only hope was to reach him fast. I made a flying tackle that carried us both to the floor and brought the chair down with us with a clatter that would have wakened the dead. We fell side by side, our faces only inches apart. The gun was in his hand. I saw him bring it up and rolled to one side. The black hole of the barrel followed me but not quickly enough. I struck upward with two stiff fingers, held like metal shafts. The fingers drove into the soft flesh beneath his chin. His head jerked back and his body arched in pain. His gun thudded to the floor between us. I snatched it up and rolled again, seeking the scanty shelter of the newel post and balustrade.

Even as I rolled I heard the blast of shots. Searing flame licked at my upper arm. Another bullet fell short and buried itself in the body of the man with whom I had fought. Once more he arched in agony. His torso

twisted and blood gouted from a hole beneath his armpit.

I was gripping the man's Luger. I had no time to aim but fired by instinct. I snapped off two shots. A figure loomed in the shadows twenty feet away, his arms flung above his head. He teetered forward on his toes and collapsed. I had not seen his face and I could not see it now for it was buried in his arms.

The silence that followed had an eerie quality. It seemed to be filled with the echoes of the shots. From down below came the swift ugly chatter of machine guns, interlarded with the synchronized fire of automatics.

A door opened at the far end of the corridor. I raised my gun and my finger tightened on the trigger, then froze as I saw the girl limned in the frame of the doorway, the bright sunlight at her back. There was a revolver in her hand, a tiny pearl-handled .22. I doubted that it had enough power behind it to make it dangerous except at point-blank range.

"Drop it," I shouted.

She lowered the gun so that it pointed at the floor. I approached her warily. If she really knew guns, she could raise the revolver and fire. When I was near enough, I slapped the weapon from her hand. It fell harmlessly. The safety was still on.

The girl looked at me with eyes that were smudged with black and far too large for her thin face. They were filled with incipient panic. Her teeth were small and even against the red slash of her mouth and her pallor could not completely conceal the natural vividness of her coloring. I stared at her. She was attractive enough to make any man stare but there was something more than that. A haunting memory tugged at my nerves. I had seen her before. But where?

She said, "Who are you? What do you want?"

It was her voice that snapped the memory into focus. The last time I had seen her she had been wearing a wide-brimmed tangerine hat. She was the girl who had shielded William Winkler from my view during the moment he had been shot.

Anger swept me. "Never mind. Where's Hector Castro Melendez?"

She did not move. Instead she repeated, "Who are you? You're not Cuban. What do you want of my father?"

My nerves were ragged. From below came the contin-

ued sounds of battle. There was no time for arguments or explanations.

I said, "Believe it or not, I've come to save his life."

Swift hope rose in her panic-filled eyes. "I do believe you. I must."

She backed away from me through the doorway. I followed her into the central room of a suite. There were doorways on either side. The furnishings were modern Swedish and seemed oddly out of place. The girl tugged at my arm, leading me to the door at the left. She flung it open and went in ahead of me.

A man stood at the casement window, a tall stooped man with sparse hair and bony ascetic features. This was the man whom I had seen leave the Havana-Madrid, the man who might or might not be Hector Castro Melendez.

He looked from the girl to me, his eyes solemn beneath the thick lenses of his glasses. When he spoke he addressed the girl, speaking in precise Spanish.

"Who is this man, Mercedes?"

"He has come to take you away from here. Go with him, please."

"Nonsense. I am free. I can leave any time I wish."

"You know that's not true. The guards would not let you past the head of the stairs this morning."

"They explained that. They claim the CIA have followed me here to kidnap me. I think they are right. I myself saw the car that trailed us last night."

"The CIA won't hurt you. Why should they?"

"They are Fidel's enemies. He warned me himself that I would be in danger and that I must trust Manfredo."

"You still believe Fidel! Can't you see what he's doing?"

"Fidel is my brother. He would not harm me."

"He killed Lester. You know that. Lester who fought in the mountains with him, who adored him until he learned his true motives."

The argument could go on forever. Below us, another staccato burst of machine-gun fire chattered through the house, then came to an abrupt stop. There was no time to waste on the niceties of conventions. I stepped close to Hector.

"I'm sorry Senor Castro Melendez, but you will come with me whether you like it or not. I and my friends have risked our lives to protect you. Every moment makes the danger greater. If

we leave without you, I doubt that you will live for a single hour."

The girl took his right hand in both of hers and brushed it with her lips. "Please go, father, you must."

Hector's head shook stubbornly. "No. I will not believe the things you think. It is because of Lester—"

He broke off as I wrenched his arm behind him, holding it in a hammerlock. He tried to lunge away from me, stumbled and cried out in pain. I frog-marched him to the door. It wasn't exactly the best way to win friends and influence people, but that wasn't my department. Once I delivered him to Jope my job was done.

By the time we reached the head of the stairs, the sounds of battle had ceased. I took a backward look, hoping to reassure the girl but she had returned to the suite and remained inside. Pinney was stretched out in the lower hall, a captured machine gun balanced on a window ledge. He heard me, nodded and signalled that the coast was clear.

We came down gingerly. Despite the silence there could still be snipers about. Hector was holding himself as erect as my grip would permit. At the foot of the stairs a single bullet crashed into the wall five feet away. Pinney's machine gun chattered. From a room beyond a man screamed, then silence returned to the house.

We went out through the side door of the kitchen. Pinney led, then Hector and myself, with Ball protecting our rear. The panel truck was only a few feet away with Rosa at the wheel. Hector was still protesting but I shoved him ahead of me roughly. Pinney opened the panel door and I tumbled Hector inside. Just as I did so, there was the hornet-like whine of a bullet which flattened itself against the metal lock and caroomed into the gravel driveway.

I whirled, my revolver ready. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Pinney raise the machine gun. But neither of us had a chance to use our weapons. A man stumbled out of the door of the garage, blood streaming from a wound in his forehead and blinding him. His hands rose toward his eyes and a second bullet ploughed into his body. He gave a jerk and then slid downward. Only as he fell, did I recognize Sam Conte.

Pinney and Ball piled into the back of the truck with

Hector, while I raced to the front to climb up beside Rosa. It was she who had fired the shots that had killed Conte. She tossed her smoking revolver on the floor of the cab. There was a smear of blood on her cheek but she didn't seem to notice. As she gripped the wheel and swung the truck into motion, there was a calm about her that was somehow frightening.

We careened down the curved drive. I was more than half-expecting a barricade at the gate but it hung open loosely and we catapulted through. I still thought that it was likely that we would encounted an ambush along the road but Rosa dismissed the idea with contempt.

"They ran like rabbits," she said. "Conte's men and the Cubans too."

It was probably true. Once the battle broke out Conte's guards would not know whom they were fighting or why. As for the Cubans, only Manfredo Garcia would be familiar with the details of the treacherous plan. The strong-arm boys were, without doubt, hirelings and they had little enough for which to risk their lives. The chances were that they thought we were local police or Cubans in exile. No wonder they had entered the battle half-heartedly and lit out when death came too close.

I tensed as we approached a crossroad. From the north a car came plummeting down the steep grade. I drew my gun but it was only Mace racing down to meet us.

We drove up to Rosa's place through the service entrance. When we led Hector from the truck he was sullen but put up no resistance. We took stock of ourselves. Ball had a bullet in his heel. His face was drawn with pain and he was scarcely able to limp into the house. Now that the excitement was diminished I was aware of the throbbing wound in my arm. The blood of Rosa's cheek came from shattered glass and was not serious. Pinney had come through the fray unscathed.

Within minutes we were through to Jope. He advised us to leave Rosa's as soon as possible lest Garcia round up his forces and try to recapture Hector or kill him either at Rosa's or on the road.

Pinney insisted that Mace take him back to the spur to reclaim the Jaguar. Mace didn't like it but he gave ground. The Jag was the fastest and heaviest car at our disposal and therefore

the safest to transport Hector to New York.

Mace argued that we should use both cars so that if we were attacked and one was knocked out of commission, we would still have a means of escape. Pinney opposed him. A second car would force the Jaguar to proceed at a slower rate and increase the danger. In the end, Pinney had his way.

Pinney drove with Mace beside him, while I sat in back with Hector. Ball was left behind. Rosa had washed out and cauterized his wound but he was in no state to travel. Besides he would provide some protection for Rosa in case of any attempted reprisals from Conte's men. Rosa scoffed at the idea that she could not take care of herself and, after seeing her in action, I had to admit that she did so with reason.

The sun was still a blazing ball in the sky when we set out. We looped north and then cut west before heading back for New York through a maze of old roads and highways. Our purpose was to outmaneuvre any pursuit or ambush planned for us. Hector gave us no trouble. He seemed to have accepted the situation and resigned himself to it. Most of the time he sat staring straight ahead, his bony hands loose in his lap, but occasionally he would slump forward to rest his forehead on his palms. I had a hunch that Hector intended to remain mute whatever happened. But I didn't dare trust that hunch. There was always a chance that he might make a scene at a toll-booth or try to signal a passing car.

As insurance I gave him a dose of Personex, a drug that anesthetizes the nervous system and makes speech all but impossible. Hector watched dumbly as the needle sank into the flesh of his forearm and slid out again. His eyes glazed over and his head rolled back. Drugging Hector might do nothing to win his good will but it seemed more important to make sure of getting him to New York in one piece.

It was late, nearly 2 A.M., when we hit Times Square and nosed into 42nd Street. Despite the hour, the street still crackled with noise and jumped with neon signs. The crack of rifles in the penny arcades vied with the metallic clamor of pin ball machines and the clatter of Poke-O-Rino. We drove slowly past the tattered marquee of the Amalia Hotel. Nick Lilley, in his oversized bellman's uniform lolled outside,

picking at his teeth with a match-stick. Without a glance our way, he gave us the all-clear sign. All the same Pinney circled the block once more before easing into a parking space in front of the Amalia.

Hector had slid back against the seat, his head drooping to one side. He was dead to the world but on 42nd Street, the haven of junkies and winos, his condition was scarcely likely to attract attention. Mace helped me to ease him out of the car. The movement brought back a degree of consciousness. He braced himself against the hood and managed to cling on. Mace and I each put an arm around him and he tottered a few steps before his knees buckled. A bevy of teen-age girls in tight-fitting jeans and knitted halters giggled at us. Beyond that, our wobbly path went unnoticed.

The dingy lobby was deserted, as usual, except for Si Bartlett whose bald head glistened beneath the dangling bulb. He gave us a blank look but his fingers were busy with the signal buttons beneath the counter. Jope would know that we were on our way up.

Nick spirited us to the top floor in record time. Jope stood spraddle-legged before us and squinted at Hector. Then he turned and led the way to Al Pinney's room. Hector staggered along with us until we dropped him down on the red couch.

Jope's eyes swung to me. "Hector Castro Melendez?" he asked.

I shrugged. "He's either Hector or a reasonable facsimile thereof. My bet is he's the genuine article."

Jope growled, "It won't take long to find out." Once more his gaze fixed me. "You look bushed, Mike. Better get some rest."

His voice was amiable but it was a command. Whatever Jope had in mind, both Mace and I were to be excluded from the session. I was too exhausted to care. I stumbled down the hall to a spare bedroom and managed to peel off most of my clothing before I collapsed on the bed.

I didn't awaken until a little after noon. By the time I'd showered, shaved and dressed, I was feeling fine. I went down the hall to Pinney's room but the door was firmly closed. That meant that Jope was still there and wanted no interruptions. That suited me. I was ravenously hungry. Nick answered my

ring at the elevator and it occurred to me that I'd never been at the Amalia without Nick in attendance. I wondered if he ever slept. Jope could have left orders with Nick not to let me leave the hotel but apparently he hadn't.

Outside, 42nd Street was swarming. On the way to the cafeteria I picked up a couple of newspapers and deliberately tucked them under my arm without looking at them. Right now my mind was on food. I filled up my tray at the counter and carried it up to the mezzanine Not until I'd dulled the edge of my appetite did I unfold them.

I didn't have to look far for the news I was seeking. Great black scareheads sprang at me from the front page.

SAM CONTE SLAIN
IN CATANIA GUNFIGHT

GANGLAND FEUD
RENEWED

The article provided me with a few facts and a lot of misinformation. Apparently the State Police had not arrived on the scene until an hour after we had left. By that time there was not a living soul in the villa. Sam Conte was found dead in the driveway, a bullet wound in his forehead and another in his heart. One of his hoods was lying in the front room riddled by a machine gun. A third unidentified victim lay crumpled across a window sill.

The papers speculated about the fresh outburst of gang warfare. They spoke authoritatively of the malcontents among the ranks of the Mafia and of the ambitious young hoods who wanted to seize control of the organization. At no time did they approach the truth and I had a hunch they never would. Jope had a way of covering up unpleasant incidents and there were forces at work for Triple V that could, at times, silence even the press.

I thought of Sam Conte dead and of Rosa firing the bullets that killed him. I wondered how Rosa was feeling now. But of one thing I was certain: I'd swear myself deaf, dumb and blind before I'd reveal that Rosa was the killer, and the same went for Pinney and Ball. Without her, our mission could never have succeeded and the chances were high that some among us would be dead.

My thoughts switched to the girl, Mercedes. The haunting beauty of her was hard to forget. I had a spasm of

guilt as I recalled that I had first mistaken her for a high-priced call girl paid to amuse Hector. Where was she now? Was she a captive of Manfredo Garcia? If so, did he know of her part in her father's escape? My stomach turned at the vision of what might be happening to her. Garcia would enjoy practicing the delicate art of torture.

I leafed over the pages of the paper. When I came across a story about William Winkler's murder in the lobby of the Havana-Madrid, it took me by surprise. The more recent violence had all but wiped the memory of Winkler from my mind. His assassination seemed a long way back but, as I toted up the hours, I realized that it was less than two days. Already the crime was delegated to a back page.

The article included a record of Winkler's academic career, his publications, and laudatory quotes from his fellow faculty members and students at Point Sable University. Toward the end of the resume it was noted that, as a young man, he had taught in Cuba. But apparetnly no one had linked that distant experience with the murder. The paper speculated that he might have been a victim of mistaken identity but claimed that the search was still on for the stranger who had routed him out of bed that morning. Mrs. Winkler had supplied additional details of her description of me but most of them were wrong. She was probably becoming more and more confused by the questions popped at her. I had a suspicion she would no longer recognize me if we should meet face to face.

I didn't go straight back to the Amalia. Instead I spent an hour wandering along 42nd Street. I played a game of Poke-O-Rino and dropped a couple of dollars at the rifle range, potting at tin bears. I stopped to look at the provocative stills under the garish marquees of the second-run movie house. Sure, the Strip is supposed to be the wickedest block in the world, filled with deviates, pushers and petty crooks but it has the color, the noise and the tawdry, tinsel fascination of a boardwalk. I like it. It's a place where I feel at ease.

When I arrived back at the top floor of the Amalia, the door of Pinney's room was wide open. I entered and found Jope staring through the one-way glass window to the street below. He turned

toward me, his face drawn and haggard, and jerked his thumb toward the adjoining room. Hector was sleeping there in a wide bed, his body curled up, his features strangely at peace.

I kept my voice flat. "Did you decide that he's the real Hector?"

"There's no doubt about that. We checked and double-checked, first under light narcossi with sodium pentothal and later under hypnosis. There isn't much about the life of Hector Castro Melendez that we don't know."

"What next? We can't keep him under wraps forever."

Jope sighed. "True enough. What's more we can't persuade him that Fidel plotted to double-cross him and engineer his death. He swears that as soon as he's free, he'll go straight back to Manfredo Garcia. His feelings toward Fidel are all mixed up. On one side he loathes and detests his brother. At the same time he's always craved Fidel's approval. I think he'd like to believe us but he's horrified at the idea of denouncing Fidel. To him, it would be a betrayal of the sacred family unity."

"You've had him under hypnosis. What about post-hypnotic suggestion?"

"It wouldn't work. Not over a long period of time. In the end it would backfire on us. No, Hector's got to make the switch to our side voluntarily."

"Isn't there some person Hector trusts?"

"That's another bit of irony. There was such a man. Hector keeps asking for William Winkler. He doesn't know that Winkler is dead and, when he finds out, he's likely to place the blame at our door. And not altogether without reason. If we hadn't doubted Hector's identity and involved Winkler, the Professor would still be alive to help us."

I mulled that over. At the back of my mind had been gnawing doubts. Why had Winkler been killed unless he could expose Hector as a fake? Now the answer was clear. Garcia must have spotted Winkler and believed that he had come to the hotel to influence Hector. Once more I cursed myself for not sticking closer to the good-natured garrulous, roly-poly man.

"Isn't there anyone else?"

Jope sighed. "The two people whom Hector loves most are his daughter and his grandson. They were both with him in Catania but they've disappeared. Merce-

des has been in this country for about four years. She was married to a young American named Lester Carlson, who was with Castro up in the mountains. But later Lester couldn't stomach Castro's blood baths. When he protested, Castro had him shot. Part of the lure which induced Hector to accept this mission was the chance to see Mercedes and the boy again."

"Could Garcia be holding them as hostages?"

"It's possible. Mercedes couldn't have gone far on her own. She couldn't drive."

My mind flicked back over the scene when I had last seen Mercedes Carlson in Catania. As I had frog-marched Hector out of the suite, she had dashed back in. I hadn't understood why at the time. But now the picture came into focus. She had returned to protect the boy and had remained with him rather than risk leading him into the gunfire that had raked the stairway. Another picture flashed into my mind: this was of the dark, stubby servant, Prudencia, whom Rosa had locked in the cupboard. If the police had not found her, someone must have set her free. The most likely person to have done so was Mercedes. From what I'd seen of Gallo's hoods and Garcia's strong-arm boys, I didn't think any of them would be bothered. If my reasoning was right, Mercedes and the boy might still be with the serving woman. And it would not take Rosa long to locate them.

I explained my theory to Jope. Excitement glowed in his face. Before I had finished, he was at the phone calling her.

Within half an hour, Rosa was back on the line. She had found the woman, Mercedes and the boy. They were all with her in the house at the rear of the diner. Jope directed her to bring the girl to the Amalia as soon as possible. They could use Ball's car which would be safer than the pick-up truck.

We had a long wait ahead of us, perhaps as long as eight hours. In the late afternoon, Hector joined us. He looked refreshed but keyed up. Once more he demanded to be set free and Jope explained all over again the danger he was in from Garcia. Hector shook his head. Like many weak men, there was a vein of stubborness in him, made stronger because it alone gave him the capacity to survive.

It was obvious that, in Catania, Mercedes had attempt-

ed to persuade Hector to abandon the Communist cause and had failed. There she had had to contend with the alternating threats and flattery of Garcia and his entourage. Maybe if she could talk with her father alone she might succeed.

Once Hector had been informed of Mercedes' expected arrival, he made no further effort to persuade us to release him. He sat grumpily in a corner, preferring the edge of the bed to an easy chair. The first time a meal was brought in, he ate wolfishly but after that he ignored food. Jope seemed satisfied to let Hector stew. Hector might be slow-witted and stubborn but he couldn't be altogether a fool. The longer he thought matters over, the more evident it must become that he was being used as a dupe, the expendable man caught in the web of duplicity woven by Fidel Castro.

As darkness fell, Hector broke his silence to ask for rum and pineapple juice. He drank slowly, with a practiced ease that indicated he had often whiled away the hours in this way. From time to time, he wandered to the jutting bay window that commanded a view of 42nd Street. Jope offered no objections; the glass was both one-way and bullet-proof. Hector teetered back and forth on the soles of his feet, holding his glass steady. His face had a blankness that made me wonder at his thoughts.

The time was drawing near when Rosa and Mercedes might be expected. We didn't think that Garcia had tumbled to the Amalia but, as insurance, I went down to comb the vicinity for danger warnings. I prowled the back rooms of bars, pizza joints, shooting galleries and arcades. I gave special attention to subway entrances and darkened doorways. Always in this section there are dubious characters about. I checked a few of them out but found nothing amiss. Once I glanced up at the bay window where, I judged, Hector was standing but the glass appeared gaunt and dark with only the tracery of lights reflected from the neons of Times Square.

I went back to the lobby to alert Nick and Si Bartlett. Press buttons beneath the counter could release floodlights that would bathe the street in a bright glow. Mace took up a position just inside the doorway and once again I went out to prowl the neighborhood.

Two A.M. came and a vague uneasiness crept over me. What was delaying Rosa? Across the street was a lingerie shop, closed for the night, with criss-cross steel gates protecting the entry from vandals. A solitary figure clung to the metal slats. I crossed to check on him. He was no more than sixteen, with the sickly pallor and the pin-pointed eyes of the heroin addict.

I had just turned away when I saw Ball's car rolling down the street. Rosa nosed it into the curb in front of the Amalia's tawdry marquee. The far door sprang open and Mercedes Carlson stepped to the sidewalk. She turned and I caught a glimpse of her piquant face and too large eyes. A passing truck cut off my view. When I next saw her she was halfway across the sidewalk, only a few feet from the entrance to the Amalia. The boy was racing on ahead of her.

I saw the second car then, a black car, dust-covered and inconspicuous. It was moving too slowly for the traffic cannon-balling about it .My gun was in my hand but I dared not shoot. The man at the wheel was no more than a blur in the feeble light of the dashboard. I might kill an innocent passer-by. Then came the stuttering blast of a machine-gun and the crash of breaking glass. I fired. I thought I winged the driver but I couldn't be sure. A woman screamed. Her cry was shrill and drawn-out. Other screams echoed along the block. The bullets of the machine-gun formed a crazy arch, spraying upward across the windows of the Amalia and those of the building next door.

There was a shriek of tortured rubber as the black car slewed wildly, then slammed into a taxi parked at the curb. Other sounds added to the confusion: the sharp hard splat of a rifle, a man's coarse shout, the insistent bleat of a horn. Simultaneously the flood-lights sprang into life.

After the jarring impact, the black car shuddered to a stop. For moments the bright street seemed shrouded in silence. Then the driver tumbled out from behind the wheel. He stared upward at the glaring light and there was no mistaking his face. He was Manfredo Garcia. He was holding his arm as though to cover a wound. A bullet spat at his feet and ricocheted away. Garcia ducked low, charging into the bewildered crowd that had

already gathered. A single bullet trailed him. It was too dangerous to shoot more.

I plunged toward Garcia but unwittingly the crowd formed a screen to protect him. They saw my smoking gun and panicked, stumbling over one another and blocking my passage. I reached a subway kiosk through which Garcia had disappeared. Far below me I thought I heard the slap of running feet, but when I reached the platform it was deserted. A train had just pulled out but I didn't think that Garcia was on it. He hadn't had time. More likely he had doubled back through the maze of tunnels to join the crowds once more. There was no sense in trying to find him; he had the whole city in which to hide.

I swung back to 42nd Street and passed close to the smashed car. A door was askew and a man had fallen onto the pavement. He lay on his side, his body curled around the machine-gun which he still embraced. The last time I had seen the bulbous eyes and swarthy face was through the streaked glass of a subway car. But I could not forget Fernando Morales, the assassin of William Winkler. To a degree the roly-poly professor had been avenged.

A circle of curiosity seekers, three or four deep, were milling around the entrance of the Amalia. I elbowed my way to the front. In the center lay the crumpled body of Mercedes Carlson and, kneeling beside his daughter, was Hector Castro Melendez. Rosa stood with Jope only a few feet away. Hector's grandson clung to Rosa's skirt and she fondled his dark hair.

A policeman thrust through the crowd and began to ask Hector questions. Hector stared up at him blindly, then rose. Somehow he had shed his weakness as though it were a cloak. The lines of his face were iron-hard and engraved upon it was a bitter, undying hate. He took off his white duck jacket and spread it gently across the dead girl's face. Then he went to the boy, drew him away from Rosa and led him into the hotel.

I knew that Jope had won. Never again would Hector Castro Melendez be swayed by false family loyalties. Instead his implacable hate would be a weapon turned against his half-brother. I foresaw the future when Hector's voice would echo out, across Latin America, throughout the world, telling

the story of Fidel Castro's perfidy, detailing the fratricidal plot of which he was the intended victim.

The conspiracy would backfire. It was too much to expect it to unseat Castro. His bloody regime was too deeply entrenched to be overthrown over night. But it would harm him. And when the time was ripe for the freedom-loving people of Cuba to revolt against the tyranny Castro had imposed upon their island, the voice of Hector Castro Melendez would be raised high against his brother. Not all who heard him would believe him but I thought that most men would hear the ring of truth in his anger.

My eyes met Jope's and he gave a little nod. I knew what he meant. He was telling me to fade from the scene. My part in the mission was over and I must not become further involved. To do so would be to break my cover and make me less valuable for my next assignment.

I turned and strolled away. I looked in a show window at a display of lurid books and stopped to watch a white-capped chef making pizza. But I didn't look back. You can't afford to, not when you're in Triple V....

NEXT MONTH—

THE CASE OF THE CRYING SWALLOW
A Perry Mason novel
by *ERLE STANLEY GARDNER*

SEVEN MILES FROM INTREX
A new Counter-Spy story
by *MICHAEL AVALLONE*

I AM A WITCH!
An article
by *ELEANOR BONE*

CAPTAIN PASHAROONEY
by *AVRAM DAVIDSON*

SOMETHING ROTTEN...
by *MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD*

and
LESLIE CHARTERIS—*in person*
AN INTERVIEW

in the May 1967 issue, THE SAINT MAGAZINE

stirred ashes

by Emil Petaja

UPSTAIRS in his dark-panel-bedroom, Sam lay still on the coverlet, staring out at the December dusk, waiting for his wife Emma—downstairs—to die.

It was working out to perfection, his plan, and it was inspired. It started out with his coming back after seven years and stirring up the ashes of Emma's old-maid love. She must be back by now. He wanted to reach a cigarette off the night table and light it, to push back the winter cold a little, and start celebrating. But the old four-poster had creaks in its springs; even a faint noise might just be audible down in the parlor, over the storm nagging around the eaves of the old country house. From all her lonely years, before and after their marriage, Emma had developed the senses of a cat, or some kind of animal. So all Sam could do now was to play possum and wait, and think back...

"You've got to forgive me,

San Francisco novelist Emil Petaja, author of a trilogy based upon the Kalevala, *and other novels, here describes a husband—the sort of husband we've all heard of—his dreams and his fears—and his hungers... You'll find yourself wondering how often this does happen. Elsewhere.....*

Emma." He put all of those old lost dreams of theatrics into his plea, plus all of his waning masculine charm. "Let me make it up to you."

Emma didn't say anything, at first. Sam had wide shoulders and a pantherish grace and he used these to good effect crossing the prim cluttered parlor to where his wife sat, in her platform rocker, hands neatly folded. He shook his handsome head and looked down at her anxiously, measuring out just the right amount of humble hope into his look. But would it still work after seven years?

Emma listened and sat and clasped the thin white knuckles of her long blue fingers. Her plain triangle-face was thinner than he remembered, the eyes warier, it seemed.

"Seven years, Sam. It's a long time." Emma had a small town librarian's tight little mind and, this prosaic triteness, along with those nervous blue-veined fingers, used to get to Sam something awful.

When she swept a stony waxworks look up at him Sam thought he glimpsed something hidden in those commonplace grey eyes. A charge of emotion that belied her placidity of expression. Hope spilled up. Could that emotion be love? Still? In her quiet rather corny way, Emma had loved Sam, with the fierceness of an old maid to whom the whole prospect of marriage comes as a crashing revelation of a wildly new and unexpected world. Still, Sam wasn't sure, now. Presumably Emma was smarter as well as older. Sam had certainly contributed to her education.

He worried his still-black still-wavy hair in an abrupt hand movement. The worry wasn't phoney, at least. He continued to stand close to her chair but he didn't touch her, not quite. He wanted her to *want* him to touch her. It used to work like a charm, when he needed extra money. But that was seven years ago.

Emma's reaction this time was a faint sigh.

"Yes, Sam," she said.

"Yes what?"

"I still love you."

Sam began to relax; then he did what he used to do, needled her a little. "But I was such a cad. I used up all your money, then I left, after saying miserable things to you."

Emma nodded. "Yes. You were a devil, a handsome devil. I think I must have known it from the first, but it didn't really matter. All I

knew about life was out of books. When you walked into the library that day and smiled, then talked about New York and Paris and whatnot, I was lost. You see, Sam, nobody had ever tried me before. Nobody even suspected that the mousy little librarian had secret fires burning down inside of her. I was only twenty-three but I was already an old maid."

"You were pretty naive," Sam ventured.

"I had one advantage most old maids don't, though. I had a rich Aunt."

Sam's palms were sweating. Emma had changed. It was as if she really knew the score. Maybe. Maybe she knew but she didn't give a damn. After all, life was short —and the winters were long and cold up here.

Emma was smiling, a rare thing.

Sam ran his tongue over his lips. "I loved you, Emma. I—"

"Facts, Sam," Emma said briskly. "You didn't love me for a moment. You loved my money and Aunt Kelsey's money. You loved hers more because there was so much more of it. It was always money. I *know* that, Sam. I fooled myself to some extent, then. Not now, surely. Aunt Kelsey was the richest woman in Bington and she couldn't live much longer." There was no trace of bitterness, nor did Emma strain to make him say nice things and do nice little affectionate things, begging for crumbs, like she used to. "You were an earthy, stupid, greedy man, Sam. I didn't care. I was willing you should have all the money, so long as we spent it together."

Sam pushed out a soundless sigh. This wasn't going to be any picnic. Emma'd learned a lot that last day when he got drunk and told her off, before leaving for Chicago.

She went on cheerfully. "Aunt Kelsey was so sick she couldn't even come to our wedding. Remember, Sam? That was why you were in such a hurry. It was a race against time. Then, to everybody's surprise, she got better and she made out a new will, just before her relapse. Remember how surprised we were when the lawyer read us the new will? Remember?"

Sam went all stiff. Did he remember getting the pins knocked out from under him. He remembered, all right. Emma was Aunt Kelsey's only relative and she had raised Emma to be just like her—dried up, tight-lipped.

"Everything for sweet charity." Emma's voice had a lilt to it, a happy lilt. "Except for the small trust fund. But that wasn't enough for two. Was it, Sam?" She twisted her blue-veined hands in a gesture that had always driven him mad. "My Aunt Kelsey was smart. She wanted me to be permanently happy. I don't think she quite believed you'd make me happy, Sam. That's why she had Lawyer Hogan make up the other will."

"What—other—will?" Sam put all of his histrionic talents into those three words. The important thing was Emma mustn't know that he had found out about the second will—the real one. What else would bring him from Chicago and Marilyn back to this whistle-stop?

Emma's eyes searched deep. They opened up a little and let out that surge of burning hunger he remembered so well, with seven years of yearning added.

"Didn't you hear about it, Sam? I let the papers know about it on purpose."

"I just arrived, Emma. I didn't come all the way in to Bington. I had the busdriver let me off at the service station and walked back through the woods."

"Oh."

Sam swallowed. "What about the other will?"

"Of course the one Mr. Hogan read to us after the funeral wasn't the real one. Aunt Kelsey distrusted charities. The whole thing was irregular but Mr. Hogan was a good friend and there were no charities specified to complain about it."

Sam put his arm carefully on the back of Emma's rocker and waited.

"Aunt Kelsey felt that I was too young to know my own mind, so the rest of the money was to come to me in ten years. In case you've lost track, the ten years was up last week."

Sam curved his arm closer. "How—how—?"

"How much? Eighty thousand in cash. Aunt Kelsey didn't trust banks any more than she did charities. She taught me not to, as well. The money was all in bills. I put it in a deposit box. It's still there."

Sam heaved an inward sigh and let his hand drift down to Emma's starched white collar. He didn't trust himself to go on with his repentance routine just now. Eighty thousand dollars! In *cash!* Marilyn and he could have a ball on that. The clothes he had promised her. A world cruise. Sam wasn't as young

as he used to be, the pouchiness around the eyes was beginning to show. Marilyn had made it plain the last time he saw her that it took more than masculine charm to keep her happy. Money was what it took. Money was everything, and here was eighty thousand beautiful dollars—just waiting for him to take.

Emma's stiff little body quivered slightly at his touch. She looked up at him and the want was there, in her grey eyes and her thin lips curved an odd smile.

"I'm not hiding a thing from you, Sam. Don't you hide anything from me. It's not necessary."

"What do you mean?"

"You know just what I mean."

He knew, all right. Those seven cold New England winters in this old mausoleum of a house had got to her. She wanted him on any terms. He burst out in a passion of repentance for past sins and and promises of future fidelity. Emma just smiled her crisp little smile.

"Money's very important, isn't it, Sam? Aunt Kelsey realized just how important. But she overlooked one thing."

"What's that?"

"The books call it love."

In the middle of these gloats, Sam decided to risk a smoke. He broke his pose enough to wriggle his toes in his new fleece-lined slippers, the ones he'd found in the closet together with all of the clothes he'd left in his drunken rage seven years ago, neatly pressed and waiting.

It was cold, icy cold. Sam hadn't lit the fire. That would be the first thing to strike Emma when she stepped in the front door. The naggling snowstorm had started up around noon and grown into a young blizzard that whistled about the snowy eaves of the frame house and cracks.

He could just see her perplexed frown.

"Sam? *Sam?*"

Flexing his fingers and lighting up, Sam pictured the scene in the parlor downstairs. Emma would take off her coat and gloves in the hall and dispose of them neatly in the hall closet, before stepping into the little parlor. It would be cold as death. The fireplace was all set with kindling and logs, one of the new, reformed Sam's daily chores, but it had not been lighted. All part of his plan. The cold...

Fear would begin to stir, and then Emma would see the note, propped up against the little half-empty medici-

ne bottle. *Half-empty.* She would stare at it for a moment, then grab it up with a quick nervous grab, the way she did when she was excited. She would read the note and the scrawled words would curl up and move across the white paper like little snakes.

He had it timed just right.

"Sam! *Sam!*"

Emma was running for the stairs, screaming his name. Sam's room (their separate bedrooms were bisected by a newly refurbished bathroom) was just to the right of the landing, and of course he had locked both doors from the inside. Emma was not to see him after the poison had taken effect, not close up. She knew how vain he was and he would not look pretty.

Now Emma was pounding on the heavy oak door, screaming, "Sam! Sam!"

Leisurely he crushed out the cigarette and assumed his pose. It would take Emma a while to run around to the bathroom door and she would find that locked, too, the key still in the keyhole. There would be moments of blind panic before Emma thought to find something in the bathroom or in her own bedroom to poke the bathroom door key out with the hope of pulling it over to her side on the rug under the crack.

But the shag rug was too thick, and the old-fashioned key was, too.

"Sam. . ." Her voice was a muffled moan now, and there was a thudding sound as she sank to her knees.

This was the critical moment. From his sprawling pose across the bed, one rigid hand clutching the coverlet while the other clutched his throat as if in a last agony to refute death, Sam shot an eyeflick for tendrils of cigarette smoke. There were none.

He heard the bathroom door rattle and knew Emma's eye was at the now-open keyhole, seeing him stiff across the bed, dead by his own hand. He heard her stifled moans as she rocked back and forth there on the bathroom rug. She had been so happy. . .

Sam's little acts of contrition during the week that followed his homecoming were studiedly careful; it seemed that seven lean years in Chicago had taught him a bitter lesson and to appreciate Emma's austere love. There were little twinges of guilt and heartache whenever he was reminded how meanly he had treated her. Remorse set him to secret tippling; not *too* secret, however. Emma noticed and her teetotaler lips tightened.

"I can't help it, Emma,"

Sam sobbed, the morning she caught him hiding a half-bottle of scotch behind some books in a corner cupboard.

"It's a sickness, Sam," Emma said. "My great-uncle Julian was an alcoholic. Aunt Kelsey used to tell me about it. That's why she never allowed liquor in the house. Don't you remember my telling you about it?"

Sam didn't remember.

"If only we could get away from this house, and from Bington," he told her. "Everything here reminds me of what happened. And the way people look at me when I go into town. They all know what I did to you. If only we could go away—someplace where everybody doesn't know about us. Start over. Someplace *warm*."

"Maybe." Emma pursed her lips thoughtfully. Then, "Why not? California, maybe?"

Sam brightened, but not for long. "It might help to go to California. Still—it wouldn't help how I feel about what I did to you. I'm no good, Emma! I'm just no good!"

"Nonsense!" Emma laced her blue-veined fingers together and paced the carpet. "Sam, let me decide what's right and what's wrong. Yes, California, I think. The winters here are so long and depressing. Especially when—" She blinked and stared out at the snow defiantly. "That's what we'll do! Pack up a few things and just go—right away. After all, the money's right here in the bank. We can take care of the house later, through an agent." She whirled on him, her pale face glowing with decision. "I'll go down town right now and take care of the tickets and pick up the money."

"Won't people think it's kind of strange?" Sam objected feebly.

Emma snorted. "I'm like Aunt Kelsey. I don't care a tinker's dam what people say or think. Nobody knows exactly how much money Aunt Kelsey left or where it is."

Sam kissed her humbly. "I can't let you do this—for me. I'm not worth it."

"Maybe not, Sam. But, as I told you before, I must be the judge of what's good for the both of us. I can't let what happened to Great-uncle Julian happen to you. Now." She gave his cheek a peck and pushed him into the parlor.

"You go in and fix up a nice fire and just sit there and wait. It won't take me any time to arrange things. I'll phone a cab and be back in an hour."

"What about clothes?"

"We'll just take what we need. Send for the rest. May-

be—maybe I'll buy both of us a new wardrobe in California. They say it's always nice and warm there. We'll need new clothes."

Sam helped her on with her overshoes and watched her run down the snowy walk to the waiting taxi. He grinned a smug grin when he poured himself another liberal shot to help him concentrate on his carefully-worded suicide note. *"Darling Emma,"* she would read, in that cold, cold parlor, *"You don't know the agony I've been through because of what I did to you. I've thought and thought, and I would only hurt you again. What I'm doing is the only decent thing. Try to be happy without me. Your loving—Sam."*

She would read it over and over, rocking back and forth in her rocker. She would cry, dry bitter little sobs. Then, after while, she would pick up the little half-empty medicine bottle with the skull on it.

SAM broke his pose when he heard the lagging creak of Emma's footsteps on the long stairway. By straining at the door he could just barely hear the muffled click of her heels on the parlor carpet. then a creaking of her aunt's rocker. He caught the crescendos of her passionate weeping, as he flexed to relieve cramps and lit himself a cigarette, settling down for another hour's wait.

He glanced at his watch and his lips framed a silent whistle of satisfaction. There would still be time to catch the evening bus at the service station corner, on his first leg of journey back to Chicago and Marilyn. He would walk through the scrub pine woods and the falling snow would cover his tracks nicely. Like her Aunt Kelsey, Emma was close-mouthed. Nobody would know just when it had happened. Sam had left Emma again, they would wag, and this time she couldn't take it.

No hurry. Let her indulge herself in mournful last thoughts. Better make it two hours. He didn't want to get down there too soon. Might be messy if she wasn't dead yet.

Time inched by and finally, when he couldn't stand the suspense and the shivering cold another second longer, Sam padded in his new slippers over to the door and unlocked it. Under his gentle push the door swung half-open; Sam peered out, listening for sounds other than storm sounds. There were none. Still, there was something *different*. Yes. Heat.

Luxurious warmth struck him, billowing up the stairway. Emma had touched a match to the fire he had prepared but purposefully not ignited. Nice of her to warm up the house for his resurrection, he thought, grinning.

At the elbow in the stairs he stopped to listen again. Everything had gone so perfectly up to now, he wouldn't want to mess it up now. But no. There was no sound from downstairs at all, except for what Sam finally identified as the merry crackling of the dry logs in the fireplace.

He took a moment's look out of the window. It was darker now and the wind had simmered down, but delicate flakes of snow were still falling. Good. With his tracks covered nobody would know for sure where he came from. Not that it mattered. Nobody could call it murder. It *was not* murder.

Stepping into the parlor doorway, his breath caught.

What if...?

No. There she was, sitting in that old rocker. Only the chair wasn't moving, not even a little bit. Emma's thin blue fingers still gripped the little bottle with the skull on it, only now the bottle was empty.

Emma looked more fragile and cold then ever, dead.

Sam stood there, staring and congratulating himself, for the space of ten seconds; then, humming one of Marilyn's favorite songs, he went over to the fireplace and poked at the grey ashes under the smouldering logs to set them flaming again. He was still cold as hell. His legs were stiff and cramped from his vigil. Never mind. It was worth it.

A warm moment before the cheerful flames, then he let his eyes flick casually over the round table by Emma's chair. Yes. Emma's big purse was there. It would have to be big, to hold all that beautiful money.

He sauntered over to pick it up. It was then he saw the note. True to form, Emma had herself left a suicide note before drinking the Romeo-and-Juliet poison. Sam smiled. Even in this Emma had followed his plan. And if the note had anything in it to suggest trouble for Sam, he could always burn it.

Sam had kind thoughts for Emma when he nipped up the note, by one corner so he wouldn't get prints on it. Not that there was any need to worry. Emma's money was his, wasn't it? Like Aunt Kelsey, Emma distrusted chari-

(please turn to p. 151)

witches!

by W.O.G. Lofts

WITCHES have always held a morbid fascination for me. As a small boy I can well remember being dared to knock on the door of a reputed witch with the flimsy excuse of asking the time. My youthful friends hoped, perhaps, that I would be turned into a toad or a large green frog! Alas for them, the joke misfired. Not only was I told the time, but I was given a piece of cake as well. Obviously she was a kind, harmless old woman, but because she lived alone, her ugliness, her black dress, combined with a black cat and a birch broom, made her appear to be a witch—at least, this is what I and my friends had always been led to believe.

Until recently, when I was doing a little research into

Like Mr. Lofts, I have always been intrigued by the subject of witchcraft and black magic—although I would not say morbidly. Quite a long time ago, I made a fairly serious first-hand study of Haitian voodoo, which resulted in a story called THE QUESTING TYCOON, which I will say is to the best of my knowledge one of the few authentic voodoo stories ever written.

But the realization that old traditional European witchcraft was still alive and operative in this day and age was even more intriguing, and finally led me to prod our own most talented and conscientious researcher, Mr. Lofts, to some more investigation.

So here is the result of his study...

But wait till you get to the end of his typically scholarly article (and, like good mystery fans, don't cheat!) I have a surprise in store which should be worth waiting for. *L.C.*

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the history of witches, I—like the majority of people—thought of witches as old hags who dabbled in potions made from lizards, spiders and other loathsome creatures, which, together with various other insects and ingredients, were stirred in a large black cauldron. The witch also prepared charms and amulets, cast spells, and stuck pins into little wax figures made to look like their enemies. This was done in the belief that great harm would consequently come to them.

The witch would fly from one place to another on her broomstick, wearing her steeple, or conical-type black hat, and with her cape billowing out behind her. Hallowe'en, on October 31st, was the witches' main Sabbath, and a special day for us when we had fancy dress parties. The girls would dress up as witches and the boys would appear as wizards—the latter word being generally accepted as being the male counterpart of witch.

Strangely enough, and to dispute a popular theory, although the word witch is now almost exclusively intended to denote a woman, it

can also be used of a man. Actually, the word 'witch' derives from the old English masculine noun-substantive 'Wicca', the definition being: "A man who practices witchcraft or magic. A magician. A sorcerer. A wizard or conjuror."

Other words used to denote a witch are: Necromancer and Warlock—the latter being a modern word for a male witch. This word derived from north country and Scottish vocabulary. Sir Walter Scott did more than anyone to popularise this word in his poems and romances and it is highly appropriate, since the old English 'Waeloga' meant simply an oathbreaker (e.g. one who broke his allegiance to God and declared allegiance to the Devil.)

Other words which denote witches, found in old manuscripts I have read, have been 'Men Witches', 'He-Witches', 'Witch-Man', 'Witch-Women' and 'Witch-Maid', but to save confusion I will, in this article, call a witch a witch irrespective of sex or any other name by which they may have been known.

In the history of witches, however, women seem to have played a predominant part, and many explanations have been given to account for this. Writers in the 16th century felt that women were far more credulous and impressionable than men, consequently they were far more likely to be tempted by Satan. Others thought that the Devil liked to have female assistants around him; whilst a more modern view is that women in those days—before the equality of the sexes came into being—were thought to be inferior and more prone to foolishness and sin. Although at that time women witches outnumbered their male counterparts, there were many male witches in existence, as I have seen recorded in old manuscripts and documents lodged at the British Museum in London.

It was around this time that William Shakespeare was writing his plays, some of which brought witches to the fore for all time, and there is no doubt that he firmly believed in their existence.

"What are these,
So withered and so wild
in their attire,
That look not like
the inhabitants o' the
earth,
And yet are on it?"
Macbeth

"The witch shall die!"
Anthony and Cleopatra

"The foul witch Sycarox."
The Tempest

"You witch, you hag,
you baggage,
Like a foul and ugly
witch."
Henry VI

Witches have been in existence since mankind began, and although there is no record of the first witch in history, it probably all started with the alleged powers of magic in the days of the cavemen. Prehistoric caves—which can still be seen today—show drawings of our ancestors of long ago, although the animals he hunted are probably now extinct from this earth. These hunters—who were, of course, savages—were shown in these drawings as always in the act of killing their prey, using crude bows and arrows.

The idea seemed to be that the act of imitating something done, does in some mysterious way influence the thing imitated, and this seems a basic concept of the human mind. The cave artists—in the first of all recorded diaries—sought to overcome the minds of the animals they drew with the certainty that the hunter would win. The strong belief that you can win and cannot possibly lose is, often, half the battle won before you have even started. Certain cave-men—probably more intelligent than their companions—may have possessed what was looked upon as extra powers of 'magic' and so they became witches.

Livingstone and other great explorers found in darkest Africa tribes which were seeing white men for the first time, whom they at first looked upon as gods, for they had never had contact with the outside world at all. All these natives firmly believed in the powers of magic and had, of course, their own witchdoctors, which even in the present educated African countries of today they still have.

Belief in witches existed in every country throughout the world. Folklore almost universally reports them as having the powers of flight, the power to make people invisible or cause others to become so, the ability to impart animation to inanimate objects, and to produce at will anything required. They had a knowledge of drugs which could be used for love, fertility or death, and they had powers over others through charms and spells.

Even the Bible makes mention of the existence of witch es, and what religious scholar does not know of the witches

of Endor in the Book of Samuel? (Endor was a village near Nazareth—still in existence—and was the home of a witch whom Saul consulted in order to raise up the dead Samuel.)

Witches and witchcraft made a big impact on history. During the 14th century even the famous Knights Templar (the Saint's ancestors) were forced to disband on the orders of the French Inquisitors, as they were accused of dabbling in witchcraft. This religious organisation—which certainly had unusual rites—was charged with worshipping the Devil by blasphemous Mass, which included the Kiss of Shame. This, believe it or not, was the kissing of a goat's posterior.

Anne Boleyn, one of the six wives of Henry VIII was reputed to have been a witch. Her ugliness, plus having six fingers on her left hand and an extra nipple, made it appear certain to all who knew her in that highly superstitious age, that she was one. It was even recorded that Henry had her beheaded purely for this reason, although more learned scholars take the view that she was executed simply because she could not bear him a son.

Although up until this period witchcraft or sorcery was punishable in a mild sense by law, it was not until the 16th century that this persecution developed into what can only be described as a mass hysteria—mainly through the influence of the Church. Even now it is impossible to compute the actual number of people who were dragged from their homes, sometimes in the middle of the night, and accused of being witches. But it must have run into tens of thousands and many—if not the majority—of them were completely innocent. The so-called 'confessions' were in nearly every case extorted by means of torture, when the unfortunate victim was in a state of mind to confess to anything which might bring him relief.

Even the peaceful Quakers were not exempt from the accusation of witchcraft, and many of them were killed during this reign of terror.

Authority in those days accepted almost any and every kind of proof that a person was a witch. One such proof, considered infallible, was the presence of a pet in the home of the accused woman. It is pitiful to think that in many cases where an old woman lived alone, with only a domestic animal to keep her company, she would be houn-

ded and regarded as a witch simply because she had sought the friendship of some harmless animal. Cats especially came in for a great deal of persecution in this respect, while the toad was also considered an emissary of the Devil because of its venom.

The old woman's pets were considered by her accusers to be familiars or 'imps', sent by the Devil to act as the woman's servants and to carry out any mischief she might command as well as being sent on war-like missions against her enemies.

Another 'sure' way of detecting a witch was the presence of an extra nipple on her body, usually in an 'unmentionable' part; by which she was supposed to feed the imps from her blood. In most cases these so-called 'nipples' were probably merely small warts. It can be assumed that many inquisitors greatly enjoyed the job of searching for them.

Once a woman had been accused of witchcraft, she was trussed up naked in a chair and put into an empty room, where her prosecutors would watch her through a peep-hole to see if her 'imp' would come to her. Imps could be any type of small animal such as dogs, cats, ferrets, hares, weasels, rats, mice, hedge-hogs, toads, frogs and birds of all kinds—especially those which talked! Even insects such as beetles, wasps, moths, flies and spiders were looked upon as imps or familiars.

In those days, when nearly every building was infested by some form of vermin or insect life, it was practically certain that a mouse, beetle or spider would eventually approach the unhappy woman, thus sealing her fate. But if this method should fail, there would be other numerous tests.

If no nipple was seen on her flesh, she would be shaved of all hair in an effort to see if a small imp was still clinging to her.

Another popular method was the ducking or swimming test. The accused would be thrown into a pond or river with thumbs and toes tied cross-wise, the theory being that if the witch floated, it was because the water would reject the servants of Satan, who had rejected the baptismal water. Therefore, if the woman sank she was innocent; and as no precautions were taken against the possibility of the woman drowning (she having been considered guilty in the first place) even the innocent died. The woman who floated was con-

sidered guilty and immediately hanged, so it was truly a case of the victim being unable to win.

A witch was also supposed to possess 'long eyes' and could only shed three tears. If thrown to the ground she would shed tears of blood. She could not walk backwards or walk against the sun. She could not intertwine her fingers, or listen to the sound of church bells. She had to count all the letters in a piece of writing before reading the script; she could not throw her hair loose, and her body was insensible to the pricking of a pin.

She could not say that part of the Lord's Prayer "and lead us not into Temptation.' (Curiously enough, there is a case recorded in legal documents of one Julian Cox, aged 70, of Somersetshire in 1663 who, before Judge Archer at Taunton, could not say this sentence and, failing to do so, was found guilty of being a witch and hanged.)

A witch also always had to stop when passing a broom in order to count the bristles. She could not cross knives or steel and a case is recorded of a supposed witch starving to death in her cottage because of knives having been placed around it by persons wishing to be rid of her. The presence of a rope or any other kind of contraption in the home of the witch was also considered vital evidence—this was supposed to be the magic pump by which she robbed the cows of their milk in the privacy of her own home, unseen by the cowherd.

Even a birthmark or a mole or wart was considered by many to be a Witches' or Devil's Mark, and once a person was suspected of being a witch the chances of he or she being proved innocent was very slight indeed.

Strangely enough, the presence of a broom in the house was not considered evidence that the householder was a witch. This is probably due to the fact that even the witch-hunters had to draw the line somewhere, otherwise every person in the country would have been condemned! The broom was, of course, the most famous of all the witch's 'props'—smeared with magic ointment she was supposed to fly through the air on it to the meeting places of other witches, coming and going via the chimney.

Many explanations have been put forward as to the origin of the witches broom, the most likely being that in the early days of history they would walk to their Sabbats carrying poles or quarter-

staffs, which were not only useful as weapons but were also useful in finding one's way in the dark around unseen obstacles. They are reputed to have ridden these poles in their fertility dances, but riding them made the poles greasy from the soot and oil smeared on their naked bodies, and a pole so stained could be used in evidence against them. Whereas a broom, being normally dirty, was safer; so the witch changed to a broomstick.

From a distance, people seeing these witches hopping around in the air on them, probably got the impression that they were flying—not a difficult assumption with a credulous and over-imaginative mind at work!

Another explanation was that the broomstick was closely connected with the magic wand or staff, and was originally made from witch-hazel.

Once found guilty of being a witch, the unhappy victim was hanged, despite popular belief that she was burned, or in some cases boiled alive. There were probably isolated cases where a witch *was* burned by the unruly mob—though not by legal authority—but witches were certainly burned in Europe; although after they had confessed they were usually strangled before the flames reached them—a generous act of mercy!

For a short time witches were burned alive in Scotland in the time of James VI—who later became James I of England. King James certainly had an obsession about witches which took the form of personal persecution, and he had brought from the Continent new forms of torture in an effort to get 'confessions.' One of these was a contraption called The Boot, which smashed to pulp the legs inserted into it; it was probably one of the most hideous form of torture ever devised by man's fiendish ingenuity.

As always in the case of some widespread national affair, everyone wanted to 'get in on the act,' usually for financial gain. People set themselves up as 'Cunning Men' or 'Professional Witch-Hunters', and claimed to have powers to point out witches to those in authority. Probably no better word than 'cunning' could have been found to describe them, as many of them usually picked on someone with wealth which they could inveigle into their own pockets, as well as being rewarded by the authorities.

These persons called themselves 'White Witches' and claimed that they had their own spells, cures and charms to break the spells and curses of the Black Witches.

Apart from the 'Cunning Men' cures, there were many reputed ways of breaking the spell of a witch. The first was to scratch her brow and draw blood—if you had the courage to get near enough! The second was to throw her on the ground and draw tears of blood. Other ways in which the spell could be broken was to steal a tile from the witch's roof and sprinkle it with salt and urine; wear a waistcoat that had been woven on Christmas Night by a virgin, or carry the Lord's Prayer written on a piece of paper in one of your shoes.

The best method of all was simply to burn her house down.

Any person unfortunate enough to suffer from epilepsy or fits in any form was considered to have been bewitched, and there are even cases on record where a person has pretended to be bewitched and caused an innocent person to be hanged. Easily the most famous was the Bilson affair, when William Perry, a schoolboy in Staffordshire, returned from school exhibiting all the signs of having been bewitched. He vomited pins, feathers and wool, and—a sure sign in those days—also passed black urine.

He told his worried enquirers that he had been bewitched by an old woman. His parents, who were strict Roman Catholics, sought the aid of priests, who were able to drive some of the devils out of his body by prayers. The accused woman was put on trial, but something had made the authorities suspicious of the boy, and—to the amazement of all—the witch was declared 'Not guilty.' Under strict questioning the boy still pleaded that he was bewitched, but a watch on his bedroom revealed that he put handfuls of soot from the chimney into his chamber-pot—and the game was up.

Perry confessed that he was 'put up to the bewitching act' by the Roman Catholic priests, who wanted to advertise the merits of their church by 'un-witching him' —but unfortunately for them —and fortunately for the accused woman—their scheme misfired.

One can only guess at what other plots similar in nature to this one, actually did succeed.

Generally speaking, there

were three different classes of witches. The first was called Black and did only evil; the second was White and did only good; whilst the third, a mixture between the two, was called Grey. But in whatever sense they practised witchcraft, they were all witches in the sense of the word.

Although witches were hounded in their thousands, there are no records in English history of any big trials of witches, or at least none to equal the famous Witches of Salem trial in the Massachusetts in 1692, which at that period still was under English law.

Ten girls, aged between nine and seventeen—two of them house servants—met during the winter of 1691-2 in the home of Samuel Parris, pastor of the Salem Village Church. After learning palmistry and various magic tricks from Parris's West Indian slave, Tituba, and being influenced by the then current talk about witches, the girls became severely frightened and accused Tituba and two old women of bewitching them.

The effect of this was sensational; as a result the whole affair snowballed into astonishing proportions and within a few months hundreds of innocent people had been arrested and accused of being witches. At the trials nineteen were hanged and two pressed to death before sanity prevailed—at least where the authorities were concerned—and hundreds were then released from prison.

One could write whole chapters on the escapades and deeds of many of the English witches, who had such names as Mother Redcap, Mother Roche, Mother Sutton, and a certain Doctor Lambe, all recorded in legal documents; but none, in my estimation, could equal the astonishing feats of the famous Mother Shipton, who was born in the reign of Henry VII.

As in the case of the majority of witches, Mother Shipton inherited her skill in the arts of witchcraft from her mother, and was reputed to have been the bastard child of her mother's relationship with the Devil. Her head was long, with sharp fiery eyes; her nose was pointed and also long, whilst her skin was a mass of pimply flesh, so mottled as to appear to have almost all the colours of the rainbow. Not exactly a preposessing lady!

Her maiden name was Ursula Southhill, and she married at 24 a builder of York, one Tobias Shipton, hence

her name. But he soon left her, because of her 'outrageous conduct with unknown devils and evils.'

Mother Shipton could correctly have been called a Prophetess, as because of her astounding predictions the authorities were in great awe of her—which was probably the reason she did not go the way of her more unfortunate predecessors. She would be absent from her cottage for many days, and nobody knew where she had gone; but it was firmly believed that she had 'gone away to have intercourse with the Devil.'

Apart from foretelling the marriage of Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn, the execution of Mary Queen of Scots and of Jane Grey, and the Great Fire of London, many years before these events took place, it is reputed that Mother Shipton wrote in 1548 the following rhyme. It has amazed people throughout the world and has been a highly controversial subject amongst historians ever since:

"Carriages without horses
shall go,
And accidents
fill the world with woe,
Round the world
thoughts shall fly,
In the twinkling of an eye.
Now strange,
yet shall be true.
The world upside down
shall be.
And gold be found
at the foot of a tree.
Through hills
men shall ride,
And no horse or ass
be at his side.
Under water,
men shall walk,
Shall ride, shall sleep,
shall talk.
In the air
men shall be seen,
In white, in black,
in green.
Iron in the water
shall float
As easy as a wooden boat.
Gold shall be found
and shown
In land that
is not now known.
Fire and water
shall wonders do,
England shall
at last admit a Jew.
The world
to an end will come
In eighteen hundred
and eighty one."

If Mother Shipton actually composed this rhyme she successfully foretold the coming of railways, telephones, radio, telegraphs, tunnels, divers, submarines, aeroplanes, airships, balloons, warships, gold in Australia and in South Africa. She also gave proof that the world was

round and not flat, as firmly believed in those days; and certainly Jews were not recognised in England—although they were certainly persecuted—until a Jew was elected the first Jewish member of Parliament in 1858.

Obviously she was at fault on the last two lines, or I would not be writing this article and you would not be reading it. But in 1881 there was certainly great alarm whenever a storm arose, people flying to the fields, deserting their homes and seeking refuge in churches and chapels, praying that this particular prediction would not come true.

What has complicated matters more than ever is that the publisher of a reprinted version of Mother Shipton's Prophesy in 1862, is alleged to have confessed in 1873 to making up the last two lines —which makes her prediction all the more remarkable.

Mother Shipton is recorded as having died at Clifton, Yorkshire, in 1561, having lived to a great old age—in which she certainly had the advantage over many of her less fortunate contemporaries.

Dr. John Lambe was the personal witch of the Duke of Buckingham—though in that capacity he was styled a Wizard. Known as 'The Duke's Devil', he led a life of crime and committed almost every evil under the sun. Although many times brought to trial for his life (he is even reported as having raped a young girl whilst awaiting one of his trials) he escaped justice through the influence of his powerful master, although he was twice sentenced on a death charge.

He dabbled in magic poisoning and also possessed a diabolical sense of humour. Once, while serving a prison sentence he demonstrated his psychic powers by willing a girl outside the prison walls, and some considerable way off, to lift up her clothes and expose herself, much to the delight of his fellow prisoners. Dr. Lambe could certainly prove that he had unusual powers.

The people of London, who had no liking for Dr. Lambe, or for the so-called justice of those days, disposed of the evil doctor in their own way in 1628 when they clubbed him to death in the street. Some reports say that this was followed by a severe thunderstorm; which story, according to tradition, is the case when all wizards die and descend into nether regions.

The persecution mania in connection with witches gra-

dually died out in the early 18th century when judges became more sceptical of early folklore and the ingrained traditions of their ancestors. Justice almost lived up to its name and the last recorded instance which I have found shows that a Mrs. Hicks and her 9-year-old daughter were hanged as witches in 1716.

Prosecution brought against suspected witches was eventually abolished in England in 1736 by King George II.

Now, how did one become a witch in the first place? Many witches claimed that their power had been handed down to them; that it ran in the family. Others claimed that they became witches through having sexual intercourse with the Devil. This happened when they were taken to a witches' meeting known as The Sabbot, and were presented to the Devil, who presided at such meetings. Many claimed that their sexual relation with him was an extremely painful affair, as the Devil—who was reputed to be sexless—was completely cold in his functions. The men in this instance were reputed to have to go through an act of sodomy, though there is very little record in history of the initiation of the male species.

Another way in which many became witches, was simply to go to a Holy Communion, and keep the bread which had been blessed by a priest in your mouth. After leaving the service, you walked round the churchyard nine times, when a familiar sent from the Devil would greet you. This familiar was usually in the shape of a dog or a hare. You would then give the animal the bread, and this act automatically made you a witch. There are on record numerous instances of persons arrested and hanged for doing this very thing, and even today the belief is still strong in country districts in England.

An assembly of witches was called a Coven, and as a rule they met in groups of thirteen, though this actual number is in dispute by many learned scholars on the subject, who say that the number ranged from half a dozen to several hundred. They always met at night under the cover of darkness, when all evil deeds are usually committed. The witches danced naked, their bodies smeared with all kinds of 'magic' ointments, then gave themselves up to the wildest bouts of debauchery, committing every

act of indecency possible.

A cockerel was, as a rule, always sacrificed on the altar, as he was regarded as the heralder of dawn, who aroused people in the light of day to the worship of God. A cock crowed at the hour of nativity, whilst a cock crowed also at the Resurrection. So obviously witches in league with the Devil feared the cockerel more than any other of God's creatures.

Yet in historical records there is no trace of any Covens being caught red-handed in the act of worshipping the Devil, although a large group of witches were caught and tried by the authorities in a single trial in the United States, as already chronicled.

What can one actually make of witches then, especially at the height of their fame? What explanation can be given of their uncanny powers? Undoubtedly folklore, in a highly superstitious age, largely played a part in creating the belief that witches had magical powers denied to the ordinary person. Ignorance of psychology, and the effects of suggestion led both the witch and others to regard as supernatural things which probably had a purely psychological basis—such as the then unknown medical and scientific facts concerning telepathy, hypnotism, auto-suggestion, trances, hysteria and hallucinations. The latter was often suffered by witches when under great torture, and probably convinced the people, and the chroniclers of records handed down to posterity, that the unfortunate beings were possessed by the Devil and his demons.

Drugs and alcohol also played a large part; what reader today has not heard of the effects of 'purple hearts' and other narcotics upon the human mind? The vivid sensations they produce would convince the victims that their fantastic dreams actually did occur. It is also generally recognised that a powerful aphrodisiac such as Spanish Fly would produce a love potion, which may sound miraculous to one not versed in its powers. The effects of popular brews in the black cauldron by witches of such drugs as black poppy, coriander, parsley, hemlock, fennel and herbane are well known to the average druggist.

Even small doses of aconite produce excessive excitement; belladonna causes delirium—which would make a witch believe she had actually flown through the air or taken part in a Sabbot. Probab-

ly the most interesting case in this connection was when a witch, showing some form of repentance for her mode of life, agreed to be investigated by the authorities and to prove to them that she could fly to Witches Meetings no matter how they tried to stop her.

She was accordingly shut up fast in a chamber, with all the windows and doors bolted, and the chimney sealed up. The watchers observed that after a short while the witch fell into a deep trance and laid on the bed, rigid in all her limbs. Entering the room, the investigators tried to rouse her without success, even by placing a lighted candle on her bare foot, which was badly burned. The witch eventually wakened and described to the watchers all that had just taken place at the Sabbot she attended. She described in full the numbers of people present and the horrible rites that had taken place.

Even the extra nipple or nipples to be found on a witch's body is far more common than the average person may think. In medical circles, this is known as Polymastia, or Polythelia (supernumerary nipples), though it is still rather strange that so many witches should have been condemned simply because they possessed this peculiarity But, as already mentioned, any small mark such as a small wart protruding from the flesh would be regarded by the searchers as a nipple.

The characteristic features of the witch—long pointed chin, slightly humped back and long nose—can be explained by a disease called Osteomalacia, which was common enough in those days. It was caused by a starvation diet, not unknown amongst the poor people. Also in this connection was Ergotism, a disease caused by eating contaminated rye bread, which produced vivid hallucinations.

The mass of evidence concerning witches being hanged or tortured to death shows that they really had no supernatural powers at all; for if they had it is logical to assume that they would have made use of them in order to escape their torment. Why, when being tortured, did they not use their powers to render themselves invisible or turn into a frog and simply hop away to safety? Why did they not cast fearsome spells upon their accusers, bringing down lightning from the sky to prove their powers as witches? It is hard to believe that they all died as heretics.

It does seem that the majority of these alleged witches were really harmless—although in some cases perhaps unpleasant—women, who maybe dabbled in making potions, or told fortunes like many gypsies today. But before present-day scientific discoveries over the past three hundred years, every ill under the sun was put down as the result of witchcraft. Disease, impotence, sterility, storms, still-births, ruined crops, ships sunk at sea, and even death was blamed upon the unfortunate witches.

Witches are still to be found in England today, and are often in the news headlines. Many are prone to seek all the publicity they can through the medium of television and radio—and perhaps the fame and fortune that goes with it. These are, of course, all 'white' witches and claim to do only good; certainly never evil. They regard their Witches Meetings as gatherings for the observance of a kind of religion going back to the Stone Age and dance naked like their predecessors of hundreds of years ago. The head of a Coven is called a High Priestess (for some reason the head is always a woman) and they have prayers and incantations as well as other rites—none of which, they claim, is ever obscene.

At The Witches Hill, Castletown, on the Isle of Man, is the only museum in the world of Magic and Witchcraft, which was run by a 'white witch' (now deceased) —G.B. Gardner—and it still attracts thousands of people each year. Here they can see all the relics and historical implements of the past.

G.B. Gardner claimed that there were enough 'White' witches around to bring world peace, and that they could create a spell specifically for this aim. 'White' witches had used this spell (a sort of long-range hypnotism) against Hitler, telling him that he could not cross the channel to invade England during the Second World War; likewise their ancestor 'white' witches had prevented Napoleon, as well as the Spanish Armada, from invading this country.

The present High Priestess of British Witchcraft is a Mrs. Sybil Leek. Recently, when in the U.S.A. she had stolen from her three magic rings and about £180, contained in a purse which was given to her by the late Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond. She threatened that a

dreadful fate would befall the thief if her property was not returned within twenty-five days.

"I am weaving a terrible spell on that man," she is reputed to have said. "It has been twenty years since I have felt so vicious, and the spell I have conjured then was so terrible that I will not even tell of it. If I do not get my things back, all hell will break loose."

She said that one of the rings, an amethyst, was made especially for her to use at Witch ceremonies and it could have a disastrous effect on anyone who wears it. She added: "A simply terrible tragedy will befall that man if I do not get it back."

Mrs. Leek also said that there were at present about four hundred witches operating in America, and that they wielded more power than the Mafia.

Unhappily, there is another side of the picture, and it cannot be denied that Black witches are still in existence in England. They exist under conditions of the greatest secrecy and reports of churches being robbed of Hosts, altars smashed and painted with obscene words, and graveyards desecrated, are sometimes in the news today. Black Masses seem to be held regularly in London, where everything opposite to the Church's teaching is done in a defamatory manner.

In general, therefore, witches can be summed up by the first writer of detective stories—the immortal Edgar Allen Poe, who firmly believed in them. He said, in one of his poems, 'The Bells'—

"They are neither
man nor woman,
They are neither
brute nor human;
They are Ghouls."

All right...

Now you've read Mr. Lofts' professional, and understandably skeptical, survey. But I, the honorifically Supervising Editor, am one of those awkward guys who always wants to go a little farther than the standard research.

I wanted the other, inside, point of view. From a real live active and practising Witch.

How do you go about locating, and interviewing, an authentic Witch?

Even for such a hardened handler of mysteries as myself, this was a challenging assignment. But somehow, as I always seem to, I managed...

Only one thing went wrong. I found that the follow-up article I had planned, written by me, about my personal explorations in the fringes of Witchcraft, would have been silly and superficial beside the authoritative statement of a real Witch herself.

And so, next month, we shall offer you one of our most sensational scoops to date: I AM A WITCH, by Eleanor Bone—who really is one, as I can testify.

If you miss this, you need your hex examined. L C

(continued from page 133)

ties, too, and she hadn't anybody else to leave it to. Not anybody. Whether Emma had left a will or not in his favor, Sam preferred cash on the line.

He read the note.

He read the note again.

The third time the neat librarian's script all blurred together in a mush. He crushed the paper and hurled it savagely into the fire. Then he just stood there staring at the mocking flames and down at the powdery grey ash he had poked.

Emma's suicidal love lyric spun round and round in his head until he bit blood out of his lips to keep from screaming.

"To *Whom It May Concern; I, Emma Torrance, am taking poison because I can't bear to live without my husband any longer. I thought money would keep him, but it can't. So I'm burning the eighty-thousand dollars in the fire.*" But it must have been Emma's precognitive ghost who added that two-word postscript down at the bottom of the paper. It said, "*Sorry, Sam.*"

the lighted window

by Dorothea Goldfinger

I WAS lonely and bored. I sat in the living room with the television set on but the play wasn't interesting and my attention wandered from time to time to the open windows. The night was warm and beautiful and there were vague stirrings inside of me like the beating and whispering of moth wings imprisoned in a cocoon.

I thought longingly of my husband. He was working late again and I missed him. I wished that the night work would be over soon so we could be together again the way we had before.

My attention wandered from the screen again and I noticed for the first time that I could see into the lighted windows of the back of the apartment house on the next street. The long churchyard opposite me made the open space possible in the crowded neighborhood. My eyes grew accustomed to the

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*Dorothea Goldfinger, former Secretary of the Mystery Writers of America, is married, so she tells us, "to the only real Goldfinger"... People were apparently startled by the name—*and *his profession—when they were abroad recently. In Manhattan alone there are of course Goldfingers who are attorneys, another is a diamond merchant, and still another—since long before James Bond—is a dealer in gravestones.... And her husband? Oh yes, he's in the metal business—in the metal stamping business.....*

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dark outside and it was as though I looked through the wrong end of a telescope. I could see very clearly into the lighted rooms and the figures in them were tiny and distinct. I could see a woman in one of the rooms. She was wearing a dress with a white top, a dark skirt and her waist was belted tightly. It resembled an outfit I'd had a couple of years ago. It had been one of Tim's favorites and I thought fondly of it for a moment. I had bought it to wear to one of the shows our rifle club had given. Tim and I were both shooting enthusiasts. Our gun collection was a fine one including several museum pieces. The living room walls were nearly covered with our collection, some already loaded and ready because we felt that modern guns should be kept that way, complete in themselves.

I watched the woman in the lighted window. Suddenly I saw a man come into the room and the woman ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. I saw one of his arms go out toward the wall and the window disappeared from my sight into the surrounding blackness.

I felt tears spring into my eyes. I envied the woman. Her man was with her and they were in each other's arms. I wished passionately that Tim would come home. I dragged my aching eyes back to the television screen. The play had ended and a quiz show had started. I made myself watch it for a while but when it too ended and I realized that I hadn't heard or seen one bit of it I got up and turned the set off. I switched off the lights and walked into the bedroom. I undressed in the dark and turned on an all-night radio program. The illuminated dial showed me the stations and I twisted the knob until I heard music. I lay down on my bed for a while and let the music wash over me in soothing waves of sound. The symphony ended and I heard the announcer say it would be eleven-thirty at the sound of the gong. The gong sounded and it was eleven-thirty. I got up restlessly and walked back to the living room and looked out at the night.

The window I had watched before suddenly sprang out of the darkness again and I saw the woman but this time she wore only two scraps of black silk. I saw her run toward a door and disappear. The man was standing near what was apparently the light switch. He was wearing a pair of shorts and as I watched he turned toward a

chair and began to put on his clothes. I watched, fascinated. I was curious to see a strange man dress. Tim always put on his shirt first, then his trousers over shorts. No undershirt. Then he'd sit down and put on his socks and shoes. Then would come the tie. The comb was next and he's slick those waves of his with a quick flick of his wrists. I watched the man in the window as he followed Tim's routine. I was amused. I thought how sheeplike men were. I felt sure since all women dressed somewhat differently, all would have somewhat different routines and little tricks peculiarly their own.

The man was ready now and I saw him look toward the door through which the woman had disappeared. Tim always waited like that for me to come to him before he went out the door. He said all women are sentimental and need to be kissed hello and goodbye. I stopped seeing the man for a moment as I thought fondly of Tim's teasing habit of giving me a Prussian heel-clicking, stiff-backed military salute at the door after our goodbye kiss. The fool, the darling fool.

I watched the woman come toward the man. She was wearing something loose and flowing and she went into his arms like a homing pigeon going to its own familiar place. I watched the man release her and turn toward the door. I watched him give her a Prussian heel-clicking, stiff-backed military salute.

I reached to the wall next to me without removing my eyes from the now easily recognizable figure at the door in the lighted room. The rifle stock was cold and steady in my hands. . . .

FORMULAE FOR FLYING

We are indebted to Dr. M.A. Murray's THE WITCH-CULT IN WESTERN EUROPE (1963, Oxford University Press) for details of the formulae for the flying ointment used by the witches described on page 140 in Mr. Lofts' article.

(1) Hemlock ("persil"), water of aconite, poplar leaves and soot.

(2) Water hemlock or cowbane ("Berle"), sweet flag, cinquefoil, bat's blood, deadly nightshade (ie., belladonna), and oil.

(3) Baby's fat, juice of water hemlock or cowbane ("de suc d'Ache"), aconite, cinquefoil, deadly nightshade, and soot.

death of an asteroid

by Sam Moskowitz

The rockets glowed a moment—then puffed out like a cheap pipe with a poor draw. The glare diminished, the sun illumined the drifting part of the space raft, attached to a scanty grid of metal girders with a port-holed metal dome at one end.

Below, a craggy, splintered asteroid, about half-mile in diameter at its widest point, played hard to get as its infinitesimal gravity exerted scarcely enough hug to hold the raft.

A tiny space lock opened and a bulky-space-suited figure emerged. The lock remained open, allowing a streak of light to guide his passage as his magnetic shoes clamped along one of the girders.

The figure bent and untied what appeared to be a many-pronged grappling hook wound about the girder. As the space raft drifted close to the asteroid, he whirled the hook and line around his head like a cowboy's lasso

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Sam Moskowitz, former editor of Science-Fiction Plus *and a noted anthologist, is the author of the best-selling EXPLORERS OF THE INFINITE and SEEKERS OF TOMORROW, and of the definitive THE IMMORTAL STORM, a history of s-f fandom, published in Atlanta in* 1954.

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and hurled its point towards the surface of the asteroid.

Fifty yeards of metallic line uncoiled.

The man tugged lightly on the line. The hook held in the surface of the asteroid. Slowly he began to pull in the line, drawing the raft down to the tiny world.

When finally the raft rested upon the barren surface, he dropped several big magnets to act as anchors.

Back in the tiny dome-like enclosure of the space raft again, Don Grant involuntarily shivered. The chill of outer space had penetrated his cheap space suit. He reached into a rubber suction compartment on the inside wall of the dome and drew forth a seltzer bottle. He squirted two fingers of potent brown liquid into a cup and before it could float back out, gulped it down.

This asteroid wasn't even charted, he decided, examining his star charts. A perfect place to cache his uranium. The surface of this space fragment was so small, there would be no problem finding it again. If he couldn't, a Geiger counter set to flash an intermittent light upon detecting radioactivity, would easily place its location.

His gaze traveled across the interior of the small dome to two bunks with straps that could be fastened so the occupants wouldn't float off while sleeping. Too bad about Charlie. If only the man hadn't insisted upon three quarters of the take for the uranium—merely because he had grubstaked the trip. Food and fuel didn't entitle a man to that much—especially if he had no investment in the raft itself.

No one would ever find Charlie's body out there in space—not in a million years. He would return to the little Martian moon Phobos—all space rafts were launched from Phobos to eliminate the expense of a full-fledged space ship and the heavy fuel expenditure blasting off from Mars—stock up on a few supplies, and head back.

The asteroid was uncharted and therefore its speed and orbit were unknown, but like most space miners, he could figure out those facts reasonably close. Ordinarily, locating that tiny fragment again, even with the most accurate orbital calculations, would have been pretty much hit or miss. But he had several atomic self-timing flares aboard. The atomic flare was really a very tiny atom bomb with controlled action. Instead of exploding, it slowly

released its energy in a fabulous display of light, heat and radiation. The heat generated by the flares was so great that rock sometimes turned to lava for a hundred yards around.

With this asteroid so small, he would have to be careful to set the flare on the opposite side of the tiny world from which he had cached his uranium. Like every uranium miner who knew his business, he wasn't taking any chances of losing his precious extract by setting off a careless chain reaction.

He delayed leaving the dome as long as possible. There was always something frightening about the gradual chill that penetrated space suits out there. Finally, he got into his suit, attached ropes to lead-lined boxes containing the uranium and floated everything out of the lock.

He left the lid from one of the uranium boxes slightly ajar, so that its radiation could be picked up if need be. Then he painstakingly worked his way around to the other side of the asteroid, mincing his steps so that his thrust wouldn't push him clear off this world and out into space.

Setting the atomic flare for precisely three months in the future, the approximate amount of time it would take him to reach Phobos and return, Grant made his way back to the raft.

As he started to climb aboard, several large rocks caught his attention. It was always good practice for an asteroid prospector to bring a few samples back for the Phobos testing station to analyze. The asteroids had once been a single planet. Some unknown catastrophe had blown it to bits. Sometimes rich lodes of rare metal lay completely exposed. He had no intention of doing any further mining, but bringing back samples would help to dispel suspicion.

In the dome, Grant tossed the rocks into two metal bins reserved for such samples and closed the lids. He closed the lids quickly because they reminded him too much of Charlie. The bleeding had been pretty bad when he pulled the knife out. Charlie had been sorting samples in the bin. So much blood got on them that he had to jettison the lot.

On Phobos things were quiet. Only two other space rafts were in port besides his own. The officials had questioned him carefully about the death of Charlie.

They were suspicious, but legitimate accidents were so common in the asteroid belt that these matters were rarely followed up. The Martian government didn't release figures on asteroid miners killed or missing.

The inspector cursorily went over the ship with a Geiger counter. The lack of any uranium removed any suspicion he might have entertained. The slight touch of radioactivity detected was normal for uranium mining rafts.

"Oh, Inspector," Grant said almost as an afterthought as the man started to leave "I did pick up a few samples from the last asteroid I landed on. You boys don't seem to be too busy now. I'd sure appreciate it if you'd check them for minerals—no uranium, that's sure, but never can tell when you run across a little platinum. Might find something that would cover expenses."

Grant threw back the lid of one of the bins and reached in. "What the hell!" he exclaimed.

The inspector unstrapped a flashlight from his belt and shone it into the bin. The bottom was covered with water inches deep. He opened the other bin. It was the same.

"Sure you put samples in them?" the inspector questioned?"

Grant nodded.

"You know, the asteroids were once a planet," the inspector said as he unscrewed the back of his flashlight and used it as a cup to take a sample of the water. "A planet that probably had air and water on it like Mars or Earth, being closest to them in composition and density. Maybe your asteroid was a chunk of ice—part of the oceans or lakes of that disrupted world. I'll have the boys analyze the water for you."

Grant felt sick as the inspector left. Ice! If that asteroid was a world of ice, what would happen when his flare went off? If a flare could melt a hundred yards of rock, it should be able to turn that whole asteroid into tepid water.

There was only one hope. If he could talk one of the boys with a small, fast space ship into taking him back—but even then, what were his chances of finding the asteroid again without the flare!

It seemed hours later, but actually it was only minutes. The inspector popped back into the cabin. "If you did land on an asteroid of ice," the inspector said, "it's pret-

ty important. It proves the nature of the origin of the asteroids beyond further debate. I'm having the information radioed to Mars. They'll probably want to see it first hand. That should be no problem, because you certainly wouldn't have taken samples unless you had plotted its orbit."

The inspector started to leave, then stopped. "Just one other thing. We tested the water in your bins. There's a little argument going on between two of the lab boys. One thinks that you've done more than discover a world of ice, your samples also prove there was microscopic life there. The other doesn't go along with that. He swears that the micro-organisms are nothing but blood cells. I suggest you don't try to leave until the argument is settled."

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MARGIE

This is apparently the time for me to admit that my education has been somewhat limited. I had never met Shirley, Alice, Phyllis, Sylvia, Lydia, Penelope, and/or Helen, the heroines of E. V. Cunningham's earlier novels, thus named. But I have now met MARGIE (Morrow, $4.95)—Margie Beck, a model for Marvin Potnik Creations, "a high-class 7th Avenue creator of women's ensembles", and if you haven't done so as yet, and would like to chuckle, I recommend that you beg, borrow or steal this novel from your nearest friend or library. Or, better still, buy the book. You won't regret it. Unless you disapprove of zany adventures which are not concerned with social significance, but only with making you laugh. Or at least chuckle.

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H.S.S.

(Continued from other side)

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